This report is made possible through the Department of Public Safety and Emergency Preparedness Canada, in cooperation with Correctional Service Canada and the Church Council on Justice and Corrections

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A MATTER OF FAITH: A GATHERING OF ABORIGINAL CHRISTIANS
APC 24 CA (2006)

2008-05932/

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Cat. No.: PS4-32/2006E
ISBN No.: 0-662-44356-X

Table of Contents

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION 1

CHAPTER TWO: RECOGNIZING THE ENVIRONMENT 8
- Healing within an Aboriginal Context 8
- Early Days 8
- Christianity versus "Churchianity" 12
- Aboriginal People in Penitentiaries: There is a Need to Work in Harmony 14
- Finding a Spiritual Centre 17
- Outside Service Agencies 21

CHAPTER THREE: SEARCH FOR A COMMON GROUND 22
- Common Values 22
- Individual choice 24
- Blending Christian and Traditional approaches 27
- Identity and respect 32
- The need for dialogue 33

CHAPTER FOUR: RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCES 35
- Christianity as a European Religion 35
- Prosletization 37
- It's Not Easy Being Aboriginal and Christian 39
- Not All Participants Agreed that "Organized" Spirituality was Essential 40

CHAPTER FIVE: ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN APPROACHES TO HEALING 43
- Christianity is both diverse and evolving 43
- Acceptance and synthesis 45
- Healing in institutions 47
- Denounce the behaviour but not the person 49
- Christian values 51
- Community 52
- Dedication 53
- Summation 56

CHAPTER SIX: IDEAS FOR AN ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN HEALING APPROACH 58
- Institutional approaches 58

Christian Healing Lodges 60

CHAPTER SEVEN: SOME FINAL THOUGHTS 64

PARTICIPANT LIST 68

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION

While there are obvious differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people in terms of culture, socio-economic and legal status, all Canadians share one common hope. We all hope that our children will grow up safe from harm, healthy and able to enjoy the benefits of being part of a family, community and country.

Violence and other crimes have the power to disrupt the harmony within individuals, families and communities particularly when those crimes involve family violence, child sexual assault and incest.

A growing number of Aboriginal communities have looked to their traditional values and spirituality to address the impact of those serious crimes and have established healing processes to address the needs of victims, offenders and families. These community processes strive to address the underlying causes of the disharmony through healing and restoration rather than incarceration or punishment.

Many Aboriginal people believe that the most serious gap in the criminal justice system is the different perception of wrongdoing and how to treat it. In the non-Aboriginal system an offender is often perceived as a bad person who must be punished for his or her actions. Added to this is the Western concept of what actually constitutes a crime. For example, under the Canadian justice system, an accused must be found guilty of committing an offense as well as having the intent to commit the crime – guilty act, guilty mind. Traditional Aboriginal concepts of crime are different in that an individual may perform a criminal act but it may not be considered a crime if that action was an act of necessity, if there was an apology to the victim, if restitution was provided or the property was returned at a later date. A classic example would be if a person "borrowed" a canoe or gun for fishing or hunting and did not tell the owner. While technically a crime of theft, no crime was committed in the mind of either the owner or borrower.

The committing of offences were also seen as causing disharmony within the community. The resolution, therefore, was aimed towards restoring harmony in the community as opposed to punishment or deterrence. [1]

Aboriginal communities involved in healing processes generally believe that a wrongdoing is a misbehaviour, which requires teaching, or an imbalance that requires healing. Enclosed in the traditional Aboriginal concept of wrongdoing is that those crimes not only rest within the context of Canadian justice but within the sphere of spiritual justice.

If the differences between Aboriginal and other Canadian perceptions of justice and healing were actually so fundamentally different, one would expect that the movement

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[1] From Minorities, Crime and the Law – J. Colin Yerbury and Curt T. Griffiths

towards healing and restorative justice would reside solely with Aboriginal peoples. This, however, is not the case. The restorative justice movement has evolved from two distinct and different paths: Aboriginal peoples and faith communities.

The question should be posed "Why are Aboriginal people and Christian faith communities leading the restorative justice movement in Canada?"

One common denominator between those two groups appears to be the central role of their spiritual beliefs in moving away from a retributive justice system to one that seeks to meet the needs of offenders and victims in a meaningful way. Both Christian and Aboriginal communities seek to address the underlying causes of wrongdoing in a way that provides satisfaction to all those involved and has the goal of resolving the underlying issues that resulted in crime. Another would seem to be the focus on healing as the key to improving the quality and way of life for individuals, families and communities, especially victims and offenders. There is also the agreement that spirituality is the foundation to healing and that spirituality can take many forms. The important thing is what works for the individual.

A rationale for the movement towards restorative justice and healing by the Christian community can be found in the Reverend James Scott's presentation during the 2003 Restorative Justice Week in which he said:

> Perhaps the most important theme in Christian Scriptures is the theme of grace. The Apostle Paul interprets the death and resurrection of Jesus as the paramount manifestation of restoring broken relationships. In his second letter to the Corinthians, Paul describes God's justice. "All this is from God, who reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation; that is, in Christ God was reconciling the world to himself, not counting their trespasses against them, and entrusting the message of reconciliation to us.
>
> This is a vision, not of a vengeful God who punishes and abandons but of a God who reaches out to reconcile, to rebuild, and to repair the brokenness in spite of the harm that has been done. It is grace, -- not what Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace" which is given when the harm doesn't really matter. It is the vision of a God that suffers with the victims of crime but at the same time refuses to let go of the offender, to let go of the potential for healing and redemption in every broken situation. It is the vision of a God who in Jesus suffers the pain of the hate and violence that human beings can do and still reaches out for us beyond the grave declaring that love is stronger than our hate, forgiveness is stronger than harm we can do, God's longing for restored relationship is stronger than death itself. This is the vision that we have been given through our faith. It is a vision of grace, it is a vision of restorative justice.
>
> The restorative approach to justice is grounded in an affirmation of the dignity and worth of all people created in the image of God. The "restorative" vision views crime as real harm done to real people, and challenges us to respond with

> caring processes that assist all affected parties - the victim, the accused, their families and the community – to address the "human" impacts of crime – the fear, anger, pain, disempowerment, alienation, grief and the brokenness that result from crime.

Prior to European contact, Aboriginal communities lived within a cultural, physical and spiritual wholeness. Shortly after initial contact, Christian Churches began to exert influence within those communities to the extent that there are several Aboriginal communities that have taken Christian beliefs as their spiritual centers. Other communities have evolved a blended approach to spirituality while others have both traditional and Christian followers among their residents.

The Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit, Public Safety Canada, has worked with a number of Aboriginal communities to explore offender and victim treatment within a community healing context. To date, relationships have evolved solely with those communities that follow traditional Aboriginal approaches. Given the number of Aboriginal communities that have embraced Christian beliefs, Aboriginal Corrections Policy believed it was important to explore existing or potential healing and restorative processes in and for those communities.

As one of the participants at the Gathering noted,

> "Look at numbers. Numbers are facts as opposed to opinions. I prefer to rely on facts. I look at the facts. I look at many communities and I had the opportunity to visit probably 500 of the 678 First Nations communities in this country. Everywhere I went, I've seen a Church. Whether it is Catholic or Anglican or Baptist or Evangelical or a Pentecostal Church, I've seen it. So to say that Christianity has no impact, is not true. Whether you live it or not that's another thing. But the fact remains that the majority of First Nations people are open to Christianity. And every inmate has encountered some form of it. So I believe that there is a role that we can play. There is a big difference between a religion and a personal relationship and a walk with God."

> "About three years ago Correctional Service Canada chaplaincy and the Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit had a conversation and, although I'm not exactly sure how we got onto the topic, we ended up discovering that the statistics as far as the amount of Aboriginal people who identify as being Christians upon entering the federal correction system was actually quite high. I can't remember exactly what they were at this point but it was about 50%. What was more amazing is that the actual people who identified as following traditional Aboriginal Spirituality was very small. I believe it was fewer than 10%. Now some have taken to Aboriginal Spirituality later on as they learned about it and came out of penitentiaries. When we started looking at projects that we were involved in, we realized that we didn't have any involvement in any project that had anything to do with Christianity. They were all traditional."

As a result, it was decided to bring together Aboriginal representatives from a cross section of Christian backgrounds who were interested in providing healing and restorative approaches to victims of crime and their offenders in their communities. Hosted by the Church Council on Justice and Corrections, nineteen Aboriginal representatives from Christian communities and churches met at the Villa Maria retreat in St. Norbert, Manitoba, with representatives from the Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit, the Correctional Service of Canada and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation for a two-day gathering. A number of issues surrounding the interest, capacity and processes of establishing community healing initiatives from an Aboriginal Christian perspective were discussed. A list of the participants is included at the end of this report.

Guiding the discussion were a number of questions that were provided to the participants in advance, including:

1) Traditional spiritual practices are seen as indispensable in successful healing processes. Is spirituality, regardless of its form, the key to successful healing processes?

2) Are there examples of Aboriginal Christian healing and restorative processes in Canada? If so, how do they work? If not, why not?

3) What values of the Christian faith speak to the concept of community and what is the relationship between community and individual responsibility for addressing the needs of victims and offenders?

4) Recognizing that there is diversity among different faiths, what would a Christian based healing process look like?

5) How could First Nation's Christian Church leaders become more involved in meeting the needs of offenders/victims and making communities safer?

6) Where in the structure of the healing process should the Church place itself?

7) How can the Church support the development of healers in the community?

8) Are there specific values among the Christian Aboriginal community that positively impact the healing process?

9) Are there ways in which Christian and traditional followers can work together towards restoring harmony within the individual, family and community in the same community? What do you see as the possible barriers?

10) How should policy be shaped to include all faith practices and yet ensure that Aboriginal culture be honored or respected?

As with most Aboriginal gatherings, the questions were, for the most part, set aside in favour of a wide-open discussion amongst the participants. These discussions covered a broad spectrum of interests and ideas, from "why I follow the Christian faith as an individual" to " is there really a difference between the fundamental values of Christianity and Aboriginal traditional spirituality?" In that respect, the majority of questions that were posed in advance of the Gathering were not addressed. As a result, Aboriginal Corrections Policy was not able to draw any definitive conclusions about community healing within a Christian context. In retrospect, this is not surprising for a number of reasons. This Gathering was the first opportunity for many of the participants to discuss the issue and many things just had to be said. Second, there was no uniform perspective about the Christian faith which, given the diverse approaches to traditional beliefs and practices, should not have been surprising. Finally, two days was an insufficient length of time to fully explore the topic. The querstions, however, are still valid and should form the basis of future dialogue.

This report presents a selection of the wide-ranging views put forward at the Gathering. It has attempted to place those discussions in a framework of six chapters that will inform the reader and, hopefully, elicit further discussion and thought.

The second chapter sets out, in broad strokes, the environment that has affected the relationship between Christianity and Aboriginal communities. This chapter discusses the early involvement of the Christian faith in Aboriginal communities and its results. It points to the difference that many felt exists between the Word of God and those that profess to carry a traditional view of the Creator's design to the people. This chapter also sets the stage for further discussions on the differences between Christianity and Aboriginal traditional spirituality and the need to find an alternative, or common, approach for both to work together for the benefit of Aboriginal communities, offenders and victims. This chapter also looks at the relationship among Aboriginal people, Christianity and the justice system.

This chapter does not address, in depth, many of the issues raised by Aboriginal people about the relationship between the Christian Church and Aboriginal people. This relationship, particularly with respect to the Church's involvement with residential schools, has been well documented in numerous publications including the reports from the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation. It is not the intention of this report to duplicate this material except to provide information that may place it in context the comments made at the Gathering.

Chapter three expresses, through the words of Gathering participants, the need to seek common ground on which both Aboriginal Christians and traditional people can find a common language and a common approach to address the healing needs of individuals and communities. This chapter recognizes that choice is a fundamental right and responsibility. Choice between Aboriginal spiritual practices and Christianity must be left to the individual and that choice must be respected if healing is to take place. It also speaks to some of the barriers that exist that prevent both sides working together but

acknowledges that it is the belief in a higher power, and not the practice of faith, that is most important.

The fourth chapter recognizes that there are differences between the two approaches. It speaks to the perceived European focus of Christianity and the Christian approach to prosletization. Participant comments highlight some of the difficulties being both a Christian and Aboriginal person, particularly with the renewed focus on traditional spirituality. Participants were particularly concerned that Aboriginal offenders, who are also practicing Christians, do not have the same range and access to Aboriginal-specific programs in federal penitentiaries.

Chapter five reflects discussions at the Gathering that about a Christian approach to healing in Aboriginal communities that, in many of its underlying principles, parallels can be found with traditional-based healing processes. Participants spoke of the underlying need for a spiritual basis for healing to occur. They recognized the need for a restorative and holistic approach to healing that denounces the behaviour but not the person and where the community plays an integral role in working with victims, offenders and their families. This chapter also focuses on discussions about the concerns and benefits of synthesizing traditional and Christian ceremonies to make Christianity more relevant to Aboriginal people. The need to focus efforts at the community level and involve dedicated mentors or volunteers is also highlighted.

The sixth chapter reflects the particiants' discussions about what a Christian-based healing process could look like and how both Aboriginal traditional and Christian followers could work towards the common goal of healing. Models, such as Interfaith Councils, are discussed. They main focus of discussion that is reflected in this chapter, however, is the need for Aboriginal Christian Healing Lodges to be created.

The final chapter provides some ending comments by participants. It is hoped that these comments, and those throughout the report, will elicit further thought and discussion.

It was recognized that the Gathering was not long enough for all participants to address the full range of issues presented at the beginning of the two-day event. Many felt that the Gathering should have lasted at least another day so that they could discuss, at greater length, the approach Christian communities could take in providing a healing environment for those in need. Chapter five provides some initial ideas about ways in which Christian-based healing processes could be implemented but should only be seen as the beginning of a discussion that should continue in the future.

Those readers who are looking for a cohesive or singular Christian approach to community healing will be disappointed. While there were many points of consensus around the circle, there were also differences of opinions and approaches. The report attempts, through the use of the participant's own words, to raise both those points of consensus and divergence and provide a balance. For that reason, the individual quotations should not be seen as reflecting the views of the entire circle or the Christian faith in its entirety. It was important, however, to provide the reader with the range of

views expressed at the Gathering. While efforts were made to present those views within a framework, no attempt was made to remove those views and opinions that were not seen as consensual.

The quotes from participants have been indented throughout the report and individual speakers have not been identified in order to make the report easier to read.

CHAPTER TWO: RECOGNIZING THE ENVIRONMENT

Healing within an Aboriginal Context

Aboriginal people are recognizing that healing can, and should, take place at the individual, the family and the community levels. The Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples noted, "Good health is not simply the outcome of illness care and social welfare services. It is the outcome of living actively, productively and safely, with reasonable control over the forces affecting everyday life, with the means to nourish body and soul, in harmony with one's neighbor and oneself, and with hope for the future of one's children and one's land. In short, good health is the outcome of living well."[2]

One author defined healing as "Culture, identity, tradition, values, spirituality, healing, transformation, revitalization, self-determination, self-government: a spiral of ideas and actions constitute community healing. At the most basic level, when Aboriginal people speak of community healing they suggest that there are many individuals within their community who must heal themselves before they will be capable of contributing to the tasks that lie ahead. They talk of finding ways to help support individuals who must heal deep wounds. This can only be accomplished if people are provided with opportunities for spiritual growth and cultural awareness."[3]

The goal of any healing process is a recovery of awareness, a reawakening to the senses, a re-owning of one's life experience and a recovery of people's enhanced abilities to trust this experience. In a successful healing process, this will be coupled with the recovery of a social ability to create a new cultural paradigm, to bring order out of what has been chaos. The aim of a healing process is to recover a full person and to develop anew lost capacities for feeling and expression. The goal is to recover and reintegrate the past into the present.[4]

Early Days

From the time of Champlain until the beginning of the seventeenth Century, the relationship between newcomers and Aboriginal people was generally one of mutual respect and based on an economic co-operation. The fur trade required Aboriginal partnership, both to harvest furs and to act as middlemen on behalf of the European traders. For the most part, neither society knew what to make of the other and early relations were marked by curiosity, with efforts to establish friendship under a cloud of some apprehension. But the early arrivals were less inclined to accept the vast differences between them and their Aboriginal hosts.

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[2] Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, volume 3:34-35

[3] Warry, W. 1998. Unfinished Dreams: Community Healing and the Reality of Aboriginal Self-Government. p. 240. University of Toronto Press

[4] Historical Trauma and Aboriginal Healing, The Aboriginal Healing Foundation Research Series, 2004 p. 78

Indigenous people of the Americas always emphasized direct contact with the Spiritual. This was understood in both their immediate surroundings and what is beyond them. The focus was placed on establishing and maintaining close relations between human beings, the animal world and the spiritual realm.

For example, the Cree believed that there were multiple relationships that needed to be maintained in order to survive. First, there was a relationship between human beings, the land and those animals that provided sustenance and shelter. Each individual also held within him or her a "mistapao", or spiritual guardian. A person's mistapao helped him or her lead a balanced life and the bond between the individual and mistapao could be strengthened through good acts and appropriate behaviour. All animal life had a similar spiritual guardian. A hunter connected with his game both through knowledge of his environment and through the relationship created between his mistapao and the animal's spiritual guardian. The hunter would pray, and if the ceremony was done in a good way and the hunter's mistapao was strong, the animal's spiritual guardian would allow the animal to be caught.

Traditionally, the Cree did not view the world in which they lived and the spiritual world as being separate realities but rather two sides of their whole existence. Through ceremony and dreams, the Cree believed that it was possible to cross between the two sides on a regular basis and relied on both sides to live a good and healthy life.

Historically, for some Christians who came to Canada as missionaries, spirituality was the awareness of God as One who is mysterious, the awareness of intensity of being in relation to which men are virtually powerless. The ability to move between the corporal and spiritual worlds happened at the time of death and was a "one way street". Although many Aboriginal people had the concept of the Great Spirit who was the creator of all things, the Creator was too omnipotent to influence people and nature directly: "his will was executed by a descending hierarchy of subordinate manitous, each of whom had a unique function and abode".[5]

To the missionaries, the idea that Aboriginal people were able to communicate with higher powers on a day-to-day basis, and that these multiple, powerful entities even existed, was simply incomprehensible. For the missionaries, it was a terrible blasphemy that showed contempt and irreverence for the one and only God in which they believed.

As a result, they taught the Ojibway that Nanaboozhoo, the main protagonist and the culture-hero in their ontology, never existed. They told the Iroquois that their Peacemaker, the heavenly messenger, was just a figment of their imagination. They convinced people that they were irrational and illogical, their beliefs meaningless and empty, their moral and ethical systems perverted and corrupted. "Polygamy was condemned as immoral, the consultation of shamans was discouraged, the custom of interring material goods was criticized, eat-all feasts were denounced as gluttonous and

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[5] Martin, Calvin L. 1978 Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade. Berkley: University of California Press p 72.

improvident, and the Indians were successfully "disabused" of many of their so-called superstitions.[6] In the case of the Hurons "the Jesuits had believed that because the Hurons had no full-time priests or special religious buildings, they held few firm religious beliefs and would be easy to convert. They saw themselves engaged in a battle with Satan himself rather than with the Hurons for the souls of these people".[7]

As settlements arose in New France, both French and Aboriginal communities generally benefited from this economic co-operation through the exchange of goods and technologies. Political and military alliances grew and the beginning of religious proselytization took place. In New France, Catholicism was brought to the Iroquoian and Algonquian peoples by the Jesuit Fathers and later by the Oblates.

The Jesuits soon realized that "the Hurons had a complex set of religious beliefs that had to be destroyed or discredited before genuine conversion was possible".[8] Among ingenuous tactics employed by the missionaries to achieve genuine conversion were tricks such as converting married and prominent men, giving prospective converts gifts, treating them with honor and selling guns only to baptized Indians: "In 1643 the Jesuits informed the readers of their Relations that God had obviously sanctioned the selling of firearms as a way of making Christianity acceptable among the Hurons".[9] It was not long before the missionaries achieved their goal in establishing Aboriginal people in a position of spiritual dependence. The old regulations no longer held, new ones had not yet been crystallized.

Those Aboriginal people who came into contact with British society through the Hudson's Bay Company experienced a similar pattern. As the British established forts and trading posts along the shores of James and Hudson's Bays, they became a focus for the fur trade, exploration and the spreading of Christianity by the Anglican and Catholic Churches.

This early period of contact between European and Aboriginal peoples has been well documented by historians and others. The relationship between early Christian missionaries and Aboriginal people has also been well documented and interested readers may want to look at the work of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation.

As the numbers of new arrivals grew and as they became more established, this dependence was no longer as great and there was now a competition – competition for natural resources such as furs and, more importantly, for land. The view became

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[6] Martin, Calvin L. 1978 Keepers of the Game: Indian-Animal Relationships and the Fur Trade. Berkley: University of California Press p 60.
[7] Trigger, Bruce G. 1985 Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered. Kingston and Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press p 251.
[8] Trigger, Bruce G. 1985 Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered. Kingston and Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press p 254.
[9] Trigger, Bruce G. 1985 Natives and Newcomers: Canada's "Heroic Age" Reconsidered. Kingston and Montreal: McGill Queen's University Press p 255.

prominent that Aboriginal people were savages, uncivilized and inferior, and the government decided that Aboriginal people should be assimilated into western society in order to improve their situation.

With the formation of Canada in 1867, the new federal government gave itself the responsibility for Indian people and set out both to define its responsibilities and, as Sir John A. MacDonald expressed "to do away with the tribal system and assimilate the Indian people in all respects with the inhabitants of the Dominion".[10]

The attempt to 'save' Aboriginal people became a benchmark of federal policy with Churches becoming an important agent of that policy. The purpose of residential schools was to civilize, assimilate, and educate Indian children by isolating them from their families and surroundings through taking them away and placing them into residential schools. This movement to remove the stigma of "Indianness" was further supported by amendments to the *Indian Act* that, among other things, forbade Aboriginal people from leaving the reserve land without written approval from the Indian Agent in their community. This further removed the cultural nurturing that children normally would receive from their parents, families and communities. The children taken to residential schools were often punished for speaking their Aboriginal language. Their appearances were changed to reflect western styles. Their hair was either shaved or cropped closely to their heads and they were dressed in western-style uniforms. The result was that these children were made to feel shame towards their Aboriginal heritage.

The point of talking a bit about this history is twofold. Over time Churches, acting as agents for successive governments, and even with the best of intents, acted as a major force in destabilizing Aboriginal societies. These federal laws and policies, combined with the use of the criminal justice system to enforce them, were very effective at destroying the fabric of Aboriginal existence. But it was also very effective at undermining Aboriginal opinions of the criminal justice system and non-Aboriginal peoples perceptions of Aboriginal people by solidifying the view that Aboriginal people were inferior and more criminal.

As one commentator noted, "these factors have fuelled a third common problem: the perception among Aboriginal people that "the criminal justice system is an alien one imposed by the dominant white society." In short, it is not "theirs" in a way that would command their respect and has come to be seen as their enemy, a view too often derived from first-hand experiences with the systems of child welfare, youth justice, family court and criminal justice. Every indication is that the alienation of Aboriginal people is pervasive and growing. Increasingly it finds academic support in the continued emphasis on cultural differences between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal approaches to justice issues."[11]

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[10] Morris, Alexander 1979 Treaties of Canada Toronto: Belfords, Clark & Co., 1880; facsimile edition, Coles Publishing Company, pp. 296-297.

[11] Goikas, John 1998 How can the Canadian Justice System be adapted to accommodate the concerns of Aboriginal Peoples p 4.

Christianity versus "Churchianity"

A number of participants at the Gathering recognized that there was a difference between Christ's message to the world and the interpretation of that message by individuals within the Christian Church.

> "It's the extremists that make it really difficult for people to come together and use the holistic approach. I call them the fanatics, those who are so centred on that one aspect of their faith. It becomes a power trip, I think, and they can't look around and see what's going to benefit the person they're working for; it's just "I know what's right for you." and what's wrong. It's impossible to have a holistic approach to healing with that attitude. The barrier I see out there is ignorance. We're just not willing to understand because my way is the best."

> "Stepping into the quote 'Native Spirituality' has been an entirely enriching experience, for me, personally. I had to throw nothing out. I kind of like Chesterton's statement about Christianity: 'Christianity is one thing and churchianity is another.' And intellectually I found it very appealing."

One needs to recognize that Christian missionaries in Canada did not truly reflect British or French culture and society in its totality. Generally priests and ministers of the Catholic and Anglican faiths chose a life that placed them, to some extent, above or beside others by stressing the religious elements of European societies. This is particularly true of Catholic priests who chose to further remove themselves from the full breadth of European culture by voluntarily accepting celibacy and rejecting marriage as expressions of spiritual commitment. Those missionaries who chose to come to Canada to minister in Aboriginal communities were even more zealous in their commitment to their faiths and, as a result, were prepared to set aside more of European societal norms. When missionaries were then put in charge of Indian residential schools they became the representatives, or mirrors, of general Canadian society. Since the Residential School system was designed to support the "civilization" of Aboriginal children and assimilate them into western society, it is no wonder that many Aboriginal people failed to adapt when their only experiences came from teachers who did not, or could not, reflect the full nature of Canadian society.

> "People who came here claiming to be Christians did damage. Maybe they thought they were doing good work. But there were some real bad apples that came here who did terrible things to the people and the land. And the land is still sick and the people are still hurting. And I don't think it's going to do anybody any good to just let all that wash over and say, 'Well that was somebody else, some other time.' Be careful. Once bitten, twice shy. If it's not that 'pure stuff' that we heard a couple times in the room, if it's not that pure heart stuff then be careful of it. And you know what, that's not what I find in churches, I work with a lot of Churches, I work with a lot of clergy, most of my friends are clergy."
> "Watch out! There's an awful lot of what's called Christianity that has nothing to do with that pure heart stuff, there's an awful lot of rules and regulations."

> "I have difficulty with certain Christians, and it is an individual thing, it's the person; it's not their beliefs as such, it's not what they stand for as such, it's their way of doing it, it's their approach I have trouble with. And we've had ministers and priest come into the prison system and this is my 16th year of being in the prisons. When it came to the Aboriginal spirituality and so on, they belittled it; they called it pagan, animal worship. That's a shallow, superficial, white, western viewpoint. To step into the understanding in an honest and committed way, is to enrich one's life and one's sense of God and Trinity and Christ and the sacraments, Scriptures, eagles, animal beings, symbols, metaphors, dreams and dreaming and visions."

Some participants noted that missionary work in Canada was approached differently than in other countries. Early missionaries living in Africa, South America and Asia made serious attempts to learn about their hosts' cultures and use cultural expressions from those lands to teach the Word of God. Church services and masses became blended ceremonies and there was recognition that it was the message, and not the medium, that was important. Those participants who spoke about this issue noted,

> "And there's a lot of dysfunctional Christianity out there. And there are Churches that are totally opposed to any inclusion of cultural expressions, they're totally opposed to our celebrations. That's really hurting our people and it's holding our people back. But I believe there is a part of Christianity that has come to the realization that we need to allow people be who they are."

> "In fact we do this in other countries. When they go into these other countries, missionaries will learn. They will study that people's history and they will study the language. They will study the culture. They will study the worldview and the values and they won't go into that country to impose something foreign. What they will attempt to do is try to contextualize the message of the Gospel or faith and it's respecting of the host peoples, the indigenous peoples. That was never done in North America."

> "There is a segment of the Christian community that is more respectful and more inclusive of the celebration of identity and that is going to contribute to the healing process. That's the only form of Christianity that will probably work within the prison system. If it's a Christianity that is totally absent from any reflection of the people group it's attempting to reach whether it's Aboriginal people, Asians or Africans, it's not going to work."

> "We have a lot of work to do. I can see progress. I'm approaching it, not from a corrections point of view. I'm approaching it just from an urban, Aboriginal community context as a pastor of an urban Aboriginal congregation. I see that the identity is an integral part of our healing and it needs to be affirmed, it needs to be celebrated."

Not all participants agreed that one needed to participate in traditional Christian churches or follow traditional spiritual practices to achieve a relationship with the Creator. Some felt that it was the personal relationship with Christ that provided spiritual strength and guidance. As one participant said,

> "I hate religion, I don't care what form it is because religion can bind you; traditions can bind you; but I knew about a personal relationship with Christ. In walking with Christ you can be filled with the Holy Ghost. He can direct you. You'll know the voice of God. You'll know exactly what to do. You'll know exactly where your strength comes from and you can walk in that power and his might. That's why I was able to do things I never even dreamed of; because I dared to do things I've never done before because I knew who I was. I had no identity problem."

Aboriginal People in Penitentiaries: There is a Need to Work in Harmony

It has been argued that the cultural and social trauma caused by residential schools over generations has resulted in many Aboriginal men and women coming into conflict with the law and ending up in the federal correctional system. In the 2001 Census, nearly one million respondents identified themselves as Aboriginal persons – 62 percent North American Indian, 30 percent Métis and 5 percent Inuit. While representing only 3 percent of Canada's population, Aboriginal men accounted for 18 percent of federally incarcerated inmates and women made up approximately 28 percent of all incarcerated women in penitentiaries in 2005. The cost of incarcerating Aboriginal people in federal institutions is significant. In 2003-04, the annual average cost of keeping a male inmate in penitentiary was $80,209, whereas the annual average cost for women inmates as $150,867.[12]

It is expected that the current Aboriginal baby boom would cause the number of Aboriginal offenders to rise still further over the next decade. As an example, Statistics Canada projects a decline of 4% in the non-Aboriginal population in Saskatchewan between 15 and 24 years of age by the year 2010. At the same time it projects a growth rate of 32 percent for First Nations youth between those ages. As 18 to 25-year-old men and women are most likely to become involved in criminal activity than other age groups, this cohort of Aboriginal youth would have a serious impact on federal corrections if left unaddressed.

Several participants at the Gathering raised this issue as a concern with comments such as,

> "The first time over representation in the federal system was noticed, was in the early 60's in Stony Mountain Institution and up to that point we had an under representation of Aboriginal people in the correctional system. It's gotten worse every year. A couple years ago it was 16%, it's up to 18%, it's probably up to

[12] Corrections and Conditional Release Statistical Overview 2005 Public Safety & Emergency Preparedness p 29

19% even as we speak. We have a massive baby boom coming up we all know about and those kids are coming up these numbers just going to get higher. It's time to start opening the doors to possibilities to do what is best, to do what's right to try make changes in the system."

"Sometimes, the first time a person is exposed to their Aboriginal background is when they come to prison. According to some of the prison systems, and don't get me wrong, I'm not complaining, things have changed and that's a good thing, but according to the prison system, the Aboriginal Spirituality Program is the Sweat Lodge. It doesn't matter if you're Inuit, Iroquois, or any of the Nations that have nothing to do with that, that's the Spirituality Program. So what happens is we had a bunch of people going back to their communities that were very confused and saying, 'No, this is the way it's supposed to be.' That had nothing to do with their actual Aboriginal Culture. We also had communities who wanted to set up a healing processes that were saying, 'Should we put in a sweat lodge?' even though they didn't have any background with that ceremony."

A number of participants raised the concern that the Correctional Service of Canada has implemented a number of Aboriginal-specific programs that are based solely on traditional values. They felt that this approach is valid for many Aboriginal offenders, but it isolates those who choose a Christian path to healing. The fundamental question for CSC is whether it supports healing or an approach to healing. As they noted,

"Because programs are defined as Aboriginal-specific, traditional Aboriginal spirituality and culture are favoured. That's from my perspective. The model for healing in terms of Aboriginal offenders is exclusively, it seems to me, exclusively traditional Aboriginal spirituality. I think that it's almost coercive because if you don't participate within the Aboriginal-specific programming within the institution than you are deemed to be not participating in so called programs of healing."

"One of the questions CSC would have to look at, down the line, and one we would be interested in discussing with them is choice. If healing is the goal of everybody but different routes are taken by different people, is the goal to support healing or to support an approach to healing? An approach to healing that CSC has taken right now is to use Aboriginal traditional culture, values and spirituality. That is the choice that they've taken. Is that effective for healing offenders? And the question that's raised in my mind, is maybe for some, not for all. It's a valid issue. So if the goal is healing then we would like to see, as much as possible, the correctional process work towards healing individuals, not punish them. Or not warehouse them, at least. Then the issue of choice and opportunity has to be dealt with."

"I remember one particular inmate had to literally sneak up to my office to talk to me. He was Christian. He had found Christianity while in prison had decided to follow that but was banned and shunned from the Native Brotherhoods. They

> wouldn't have anything to do with him. He wasn't allowed to attend their events. He wasn't allowed to do anything with them to the point he was told, "The Native Liaison Officer belongs to us, not you and you can't see her." So he had to sneak to my office. Now, this individual isn't talking about how this changed his life and I never saw that particular individual again. I saw a lot of guys who walked around with their medicine pouches and talked about how sacred that was and everything else. I've watched them come through the system 3 or 4 times while I was in the same Institution. What it boils down to is that one doesn't work more than the other."

One participant, with experience in federal corrections, did recognize that in at least one institution, inmates were allowed to choose their own form of spirituality. He said,

> "I see Native inmates encouraged to take part in Aboriginal spiritual programs, but they are not being forced to participate. They have a choice, either to follow the Christian spirituality or the Native spirituality. That is my experience, so far, in the federal system and I find that it's working well for some. When I say for some, I've been mainly involved with the inmates that have come to me, personally, on their own. I didn't go seeking them out and have come to me and shared with me their experiences in the federal system."

Participants spoke about the value of having an Aboriginal Christian leader come into penitentiaries and minister to Aboriginal inmates who choose to follow a Christian path. Not only does the Christian minister or priest share ceremony, but he also shares many common experiences with the inmates. As they noted,

> "We talk about helping the inmates. I think we're talking about deliverance. We're talking about people who are captives, who are broken hearted. I have seen those faces of our people; I've heard their stories. That's why I say that it's a form of insanity to do the same thing over and over again and expect different results. Something is wrong in the system. And I know that when we walk out of here it may take 5, 10, 15 years before it's even implemented. But I do know the importance of conveying, not what's in your head, that's head knowledge. You learn that in school. But what's in the heart, that's your experience."

> "I found it encouraging when the Aboriginal Christian leaders from the community came to the institutions and spoke about Jesus. Just seeing the colour of their skin inspired me a little more to keep coming to the church because of the colour of the skin. That really affects a person. Some guys were traditional, some were Christians, but during that time we were all seeking something spiritual. Me too, that confusion, when you spoke of the confusion part, I didn't want to let go of the Indian way."

> "I think it's a matter of balance. It is important that we not throw the history. There have been many steps that are very meaningful to a whole lot of people and it's important not to forget that. Anyway I just didn't want to lose that history

because sometimes what happens is we just jump and we forget there's been a whole battle there before in terms of trying meet a creation of equality between a priest and an elder. That was a hard fought battle. That was a very hard fought battle in prisons. There were Christian people who believed in that fight as well, not to the exclusion of their own belief but the integration of both in a meaningful way for Aboriginal People."

Finding a Spiritual Centre

More and more Aboriginal people are recognizing that the core to successful healing of offenders and victims is the return to a strong spiritual centre. Healing processes emphasize, in both their philosophy and practices, the need for individuals to find a meaningful relationship with the Creator as a prerequisite for moving through their healing journey. How an individual finds that relationship, either through traditional ceremony or the Church, is less important than achieving it. As participants noted,

"All sides, it was coming from everywhere, everyone is saying that's not the way to go 'No, Cultural is not the way.' But I know now, learning from him. He tells me this is what they say when they say the Creator, that's like your God. He's open to everything. We don't fight at all. All these religions, whatever you want to call them. There are good people in every one of them. And there are people that are hyped up in every group. They got him mixed up. When he got out of Stony Mountain people were fighting and people were saying no you don't go this way, you don't to this, this is wrong."

"I met this one man in our community, he come listen to us and says, 'Hey! I'm going up to a northern community to bring the Good News to the Native people. I'm going to tell them about God,' he says. So, I took him outside and I say, 'When you go up to that community, God is already in that community, you find him there for yourself.' He looked at me and said, 'What do you mean?' I said, 'Just go there, you'll know what I mean when you get there.'"

"I find after 15 years of working with people who are incarcerated, both federal parolees and people who've done time, is they are looking for a path. They are looking for something genuine, real and practical. You can show them a 'toolbox' and they can take the tool and fasten it any way they want to fit their hands, personalize it, individualize it. And they can see but just a speck of hope, or faith, or joy then it gives them courage to actually say maybe this is worthwhile to consider."

"But my question is: are we prepared to what the Spirit of God wants us to do? That's why I wanted to say if it is of God it will work and if it's not of God, it will not work. We can formulate all kinds of opinions on what will be successful and what may not be successful. But ultimately it is the Spirit that will make it successful. He's looking for people who are like-minded, of one vision. The Book of Habakkuk says: 'Man perishes without a vision.' I think that's what

we're looking for, over the last little while, is a vision. We look for some sense of what it will take, whether it's Aboriginal or native spirituality, Christianity a mixture, or a combination of other faiths. But ultimately, I go back to my question: is this of God? Because if it is of God, the Spirit will give a vision to people. And it was God himself or the Creator by himself who set you free, who took you at whatever path or point you were and showed you who He is or in inclusive language, who She is. But the Creator is here to give us vision. That's why I'm saying, 'are we prepared to see what the Spirit wants to do?' Because in my understanding of the Spirit, if you're not on the bandwagon, he'll find somebody else."

"I have been in sweat lodges. I've been in longhouse ceremonies and I have no problem with it whatsoever. Yet I'm an ordained minister, as you know, and I'm a Pentecostal one to boot. When I go there, I'm able to be comfortable because I'm comfortable with my own spirituality. I'm comfortable with who I am. I can partake of burning ceremonies and I've done it many times, longhouse ceremonies, dancing and everything else. I'm comfortable in that particular environment. When I'm in an environment like that, I know that I am in a world that is a spiritual world. I'm in a world that is a world where good exists and bad exists and it can exist in longhouse ceremonies, in longhouses and sweatlodges and it can exist in churches. I go there with confidence of knowing who I am in Christ and I'm going there and then I'm there to be respectful and to learn and to listen and then to offer my prayers onto my Creator, onto God through Jesus Christ and I can do that."

"If it was a night to go to Church, I participated. I participated in Christian Roman Catholic, I participated in every single one, it didn't bother me what the outcome was because I knew I was going there to pray directly to the Creator. I was going in there to pray, to pray for good things. That's what I was going in there to do. I was going there to pray for my family. I was going to pray for the inmates in general. I was going in there to pray for the problems we have in society. That's all I was going in there for. I wasn't going in there to tell everybody that this is the only way, that there is no other way."

Participants recognized that following a Christian path to healing is difficult for many Aboriginal people who have chosen this route. Whether because of the residential school legacy or the re-emergence of Aboriginal spiritual practices, some participants acknowledged that the divide between the two approaches to spirituality was widening. Christianity is seen as a "White man's religion" and Aboriginal Christians can be seen as turning their backs on their cultures. Several participants spoke about this issue and said,

"There are people out there, the Christian community that are being ostracised because of what they believe in. They're not allowing them to have a choice, and they're not opening doors for them. They believe that there is only this one way."

"When we all got out, we tried to go to different churches in the city but I don't know how to say it but some of us couldn't adapt to that setting because of the skin colour, it's the skin colour again. I don't want to sound like I'm racist. At one time I used to be racist because I was always thinking about the hurt done to us as Indian people, but I don't want to be like that, I don't want to live in grief."

"I was moved earlier this morning by a couple of statements that kind of cut to the heart of what Christianity is and how it works for people. I'm not a Christian. That's why I always cut to the heart by remembering that there are people who don't wear all the contradictions that Christianity brings along with it. I heard a few times earlier this morning people talk about Christianity as a White man's religion. And I kind of laughed because I know I look like a white person. If you look at my ancestors, they're from Lebanon."

"One of the major barriers is fear. There's a lot of fear. Or thinking that his way is right, or my way is right. We need to try not to do that. Instead try to be a good role model for clients because the bottom line is we want them to heal."

"I find sometimes it easier for me to understand this because, being Métis I can relate. I've been called Half-breed most of my life. Not accepted in Indian circles because I'm not Indian enough for them. But not accepted in White circles because I'm not White enough for them. So where in the heck do I go? It makes it tough sometimes but it makes it easier to understand. Sometimes we're just not accepted. But I still live in both cultures. It makes it easier for me to understand it."

Participants also recognized that there were different denominations within the Christian faith that need to be recognized. While there may be different doctrines within each denomination, however, the cornerstone of Christianity is Christ. They said,

"When we look at religion and Christianity, someone else said that there is a world of a difference. Religion, somebody said is a search after God. It's a search after a fulfilment of that void that's within you, it's a craving after, it's religion. Whereas Christianity is following after Christ, is searching after Christ and following Christ, walking with Christ. And there's a whole difference between the two and the two really have a part to play with respect to what a Christian healing process should look like. Well, obviously you're going to have different faiths that are going to be involved because there are some that are in the system that we want, a faith that advocates what their doctrine of faith maybe. For example, it may that of belonging to that a particular Church or that of belonging to a particular denomination or that of belonging to maybe a faith that advocates for you, you have to operate by good works or there might be another faith that might advocate that you have to adhere to the teachings of Christ and then there are other faiths that might say no, you have to be born again of the Spirit of God and so you have a variety of faiths that are there but it's a personal thing."

"But I was going through that question and like I said looking at it simply: What would a Christian based healing process look like? One that works. That what it would look like to me, one that works. One where everybody is going to come out and be happy and follow Christ's example and the whole world is going to be great. But I'll wake up too and realize that's not a reality. The diversity of the different faiths, I was listening the different remarks going around and I work for the Lutheran Church. And if any of you are familiar with the Lutheran Church, it's probably one of the most conservative ones out there. But in my heart, I know and I get to visit a lot of the different churches and the different denominational faiths, then I'd ask you to search your heart here as different Christian ministers and Christian workers. We have different doctrinal beliefs, and we have different denominational faiths and practices that we use, but is not the centre of all are Christian faith, Christ?"

"And out of my experience of the study of Theology and what I've been hearing here, some of the ways we both work together and find barriers are the search for who you are, what we believe and from where we've come. I suppose we put these under headings like 'ideology' or 'identity' or 'belief'. And it's a search for who we are. I'm Anglican by theological training but I'm multi-faith in my heart. I pray like a Baptist, I worship like a Roman Catholic, and I stand up and wave my arms like an Evangelical. I have a whole host of selves in me. Even in my Anglican Church, there are 3 major groups. There's the High Church, the Middle Church and the Low Church. We call them the high and crazy, middle and hazy and the low and lazy. So that's a challenge for us to find ourselves and our ideologies in the presence of this flow of history of which we are part."

The point was made that families, communities and Churches are never totally homogeneous. Conflicts can arise and alliances can be formed with different members of the group and they can change over time. It is important to accept these shifting patterns and to work towards living with them. Healing, whether at the individual or community level, is healthy relationship building. Obstacles to good relationships need to be acknowledged and broken down through awareness, action and acceptance. As one participant said,

"I just want to say a few things having heard the Circle go around. I think one of the things we're really struggling with is something an academic called Stuart Hall who writes in *Cultural Studies*[13] calls the unities and differences we don't recognize in our own communities. Somehow we have thought that communities are built in consensus and yet if we look at our own communities, even our Church communities, and certainly the prison community or any community, they're not built in consensus. They're built in unities of difference, we're all different and we're constantly struggling with that and we sort of take on different alliances, almost different identities. We often have conflict between the

13 Hall, Stuart: Critical Dialogues in Cultural Studies. Edited by: Kuan-Hsing Chen, David Morley Routledge Publishing, 1996

alliances, even within our families, and communities. We learn how to negotiate those and how to live with those. But outside of that we assume that what we have to have is some kind of consensus particularly in regard to these issues of should Christianity be one avenue toward healing within the prisons."

Outside Service Agencies

One of the participants questioned whether government or private sector agencies working with Aboriginal victims and offenders can be effective if those services either lack a spiritual element or are in conflict with an individual's belief.

> "We were talking earlier in the lobby saying that Aboriginal Christianity hearing those words together excites me. A survey I have been doing since I've been in Thunder Bay the past 6 months going to all the non-spiritual providing services, the social services, the agencies within our community and explaining what our ministry was about and what we're trying to provide and asking them what was missing from their programs and look at the wheel of life balance with physical, emotional, mental and spiritual. It was unanimous across the board, with every agency that I conversed with or communicated with they all stated that the spiritual was missing and that's what they needed, they needed that brought in to make good balance for the people."

CHAPTER THREE: SEARCH FOR A COMMON GROUND

Common Values

As noted earlier in this report, if the differences between Aboriginal and other Canadian perceptions of justice and healing were actually so fundamentally different, one would expect that the movement towards healing and restorative justice would reside solely with Aboriginal peoples. This, however, is not the case. The restorative justice movement has evolved from two distinct forces: Aboriginal peoples and faith communities.

Participants at the Gathering recognized that the underlying messages inherent in both Christianity and Aboriginal traditional spirituality should not lead to tension between the two approaches to healing. Quite the contrary, many participants saw that both approaches were compatible, and noted,

> "Is there something at the core of either Christianity or Aboriginal traditional spirituality that disallows them to participate with one another? I keep hearing this tension, and I don't understand it. It just seems so simple to me. Maybe I've got a mental block here but it seems to be an unnecessary tension. Could someone answer whether there's something essential either in Christianity or Aboriginal spirituality that says they can't function together, that they have to be separate programs and separate approaches?"

> "We have many key values: love, compassion, and respect. Those are common values, helping one another, opening doors for people; my biggest problem is that people don't understand about the freedom we have in this country. And that is the freedom of choice. But you cannot make the choice if you aren't allowed to express it. I think we need to allow the inmates that are there to have a choice."

> "One way of looking at it is to say. 'It's not my toolbox, it's your toolbox.' These are some tools on the table, look at what you think you could use. This worked for me, it may work for you, and it may not work for you. You take what you want, put it in your toolbox; they will help you to get you back to your community, wherever it is. That is a lot of empowerment – partly empowerment is through wellness by Tradition, Christian, whatever else. That's the approach. It's not about me, it's about you. I'm only here as a facilitator. Everything starts with dialogue, everything starts with conversation, everything starts with a bunch of people sitting in a room talking about it saying this sound like a good idea and then things go from there. We want to initiate this discussion anyway."

> "Conversion is not one nation going to another nation and converting them. It's like Peter when he met Cornelius and he said he had a vision. They sent for Peter and Peter was only an instrument. It's not one nation converting another nation, God is already speaking to us and virtually before we are showing what really he is saying through his Word and through our presence. I was in one community. It

was a large community and I was a priest there. One day a person approached me and said, 'Do you believe in Native spirituality?' So I said, 'It's like this. The Old Testament, they didn't throw it away, they kept it. The New Testament and the Old Testament came together. Same with us. Who we are, who we were from the beginning.'"

It was mentioned during the Gathering that non-Aboriginal inmates are often welcome to participate in Aboriginal programs and that they benefit from them. One participant summed it up by saying,

> "I just want to share that with you because this is my experience working in the federal system. I just what to stress the point that the white inmates if they want to participate in the Sweat Lodges; they're welcomed to do so. The ones that have experienced that part, it was very healing for them. It was a positive experience for them. And I'm speaking of only the facility where I work. I have no idea about other institutions, if that is a common practice."

Throughout the Gathering, participants would often return to question whether Aboriginal Christians and traditional followers could work together. They recognized that it is not an easy task to bring the two forces together, but acknowledged that it was possible if both parties kept and open mind and continually recognized that the goal of both approaches is to support and individual on his or her healing journey. As was said in the Gathering,

> "I'm assuming it's Aboriginal Christians not just Christians in general and, of course, Aboriginal traditionalists working together. Where there is an interest and will on the part of traditionalists and Christians, based on mutual respect, it is possible. You can't coerce Aboriginal traditionalists and Aboriginal Christians to work together on anything. But I think if there is an interest and there's a will, and it's based on common values, starting with mutual respect, I think it is possible. I think that if we take the focus off ourselves and keep the focus on the individual, family and community as a goal and the goal is healing. So if we take the focus off our own approaches to healing and the focus is the individual, the family and the community and their healing, I think it's possible."

> "I think on that continuum of healing, some people are just beginning their process and view Christianity or the Church as the victimizer. Their attitude toward the Church is, 'Look at what the Church has done to our families and communities. Look at what Christianity has done to our families and communities. Christianity has decimated our families and communities.' That's the mindset. I think what would have to happen is that Aboriginal Christian leaders, chaplains, people that go into the prisons and traditionalists would need sit down and work out some kind of covenant and again the focus needs to be not so much themselves but the healing of individuals, families and communities. If that's our expressed goal there are ways to achieve that goal. There are different paths to that goal. I think it can work but again, those people would need to sit in

a Circle like this and enter into a dialogue and talk about common values and discuss how can we achieve better relations."

"There's a couple thoughts, I suppose, that linger within my heart with respect to this question of whether or not Christians and traditionalists can work together to help the individual family, community. I said, 'No', definitely, absolutely, imperatively, absolutely not. Then I said, 'Yes', absolutely they can. Then I thought, 'Well, with God all things are possible.' Then I thought, the Scripture says, 'How can two walk together lest they agree together?' That is scriptural. That really is in the Old Testament and in fact it is inferred many times throughout the Word of God. 'How can two walk together less they agree together?' All of these thoughts go through my mind and then I also think there are several layers to working together. There are several criteria and there's the person's worldview. Depending on what your worldview is and what you believe is the answer to the vision that you want to accomplish when working with people, it would dictate whether or not the two could work together, I believe. So for some, their mission and their worldview might be such that they would not be able to work together, to agree together."

"Somehow we have thought that communities are built on consensus. Yet if we look at our own communities, even our Church communities, and certainly the prison community, they're not built in consensus. They're built in unities of difference. We're all different and we're constantly struggling with that. We take on different alliances, almost different identities, and in that taking on one of those we negotiate. We're always negotiating through those areas and we divest ourselves of those alliances too. But we have conflict between the alliances, even our families, in communities. We learn how to negotiate those and how to live with those. And somehow when we get outside of that, in a Circle like this, we assume that what we have to have is some kind of consensus particularly in regard to these issues of should Christianity be one avenue toward healing within the prisons."

Individual choice

At a basic level, a key to successful healing is providing choice to the individual and allowing him or her the freedom to express that choice through whatever means works. Choice leads to empowerment and empowerment leads to the strength to heal. As one participant noted,

"I think that our present inmates need to have that choice, to have that option to know that they can go and talk to somebody like an Elder or go to a spiritual place where Jesus is proclaimed as being the answer. For example, in one case the judge said that in order to have parole you have to go to the traditional cultural Healing Lodge. 'That's the only way you can have parole'. The offender said, 'No, I don't want to go the Healing Lodge. That's not what I believe. I'm a

Christian and I don't want to go there.' So she was turned down, apparently a number of times.

Finally another judge, Murray Sinclair, had the privilege of working with her. And he said, 'Ma'am, why is it that you don't want to go to the Healing Circles for healing? You want parole, don't you?' She said, 'I want parole but I don't believe it and I don't want to go there.' And so Judge Sinclair said, 'What is it that you want?' She said: 'I want a place where I can go that I believe in like a spiritual, a Christian healing place.' And Judge Sinclair said, 'Ma'am, I'm going to give you that opportunity.' and he gave her the opportunity.

And so, she went to this place where she wanted to go. And he said that was months ago, she never came back he never even heard of her after. As far as he was concerned she had recovered from what she was going through and was mandated to go on parole.

So the point was, the judge was saying, 'look what's needed is not just Culture but there's need to be a choice'. The choice could also encompass a lot of things out there, but one of the things is well why not Christianity or the Christian approach. And I thought that finally, thank God, there's somebody, that there's a judge, there's somebody that's willing to say, 'we human beings have a choice. We should be given a choice'. That's what he did."

Another participant spoke about the value of others welcoming different choices and the impact it had on his own personal life, both as an individual and as a person helping others. He commented,

"I went into treatment myself because I knew there had to be more to life than what I was living. When I got there, there was more traditional things that I had to do. I still had the fear in me. I didn't know if I could participate. So I decided to take a stand for God there. It was a Circle like this. Every morning there would be 15 of us and we do affirmations together. I stood up and said that I could no longer smudge and do all of these things because I believed in God and I thought, 'Well, I guess they're going to kick me out of this Circle.' But they never did. They welcomed me there. Since then, and it's been 13 years now, I do smudge, and I do talk with the Elder. He talks with me and we can sit down and we can talk about things. It's not like, 'If you take them to Church, you're this.' If they want to go to Church, I'll take them. If they want to go pick cedar, I take them. But for the Elder and myself, we had to sit down and talk things through. But the fear was a big one; fearful for him as it was for me. I did not know what to expect. But we have worked that out today and I do believe we can work together. But you have to be willing, to look at their way and he's got to come my way too. It's not all one way. And I believe anything can work it you want it to work."

As noted earlier, several participants at the Gathering stressed the importance of allowing individuals to have the choice in seeking out the best path for his or her healing journey and that his or her choice should be acknowledged and respected. As participants noted,

> "I know that the Creator that I serve is a good God, he wants me to love my neighbour, love who he is as a person and we can talk about people, not everybody is of God. When you're born, you're pure. There is no negative thing in you when you're born. That negative thing comes on in the future when you're educated that way. When you're born you're pure. And again with the choices that does play a big key factor. It's your choice if you want to follow that way, it's your choice. Well, let's respect those choices. There's got to be respect."

> "Again getting back to choice, I think people need to have a choice and it can't be just exclusively traditional Aboriginal spirituality. It might not even be Christian based either. You have to allow the offender to choose the path of healing. You can't dictate it to them. It sort of like what happened to us Aboriginal peoples 100 years ago, 200 years ago. We had Christianity imposed upon us. There needs to be respect for different traditions and Christianity is one tradition. Aboriginal spirituality is another. If respect is a fundamental value that we all share, it's a common value. We talk a lot about respect. Yet if we're disrespecting another tradition by excluding through policy or whatever. I think that's wrong."

Other participants strongly affirmed the value and importance of choice, particularly for Aboriginal inmates in federal institutions, by saying,

> "We have many key values: love, compassion, respect. Those are common values, helping one another, opening doors for people. My biggest problem is that people don't understand about the freedom we have in this country. And that is the freedom of choice. But you cannot make the choice if you aren't allowed to express that view that you had. I think we need to allow the inmates that are there to have a choice."

> "I don't know about the Native spirituality to even speak on that. I was born into the Catholic faith and I like being a Catholic. So I'm going to speak from that perspective. I encourage the inmates that I work with to go with whatever spirituality they follow. It works for them. I encourage them to follow that spirituality. I know the institution where I work the resources are there for them and CSC has made it possible and really encouraged the guys to participate in their Native spirituality if they feel they want to go that way. I know this also, that some of the inmates that follow the Native tradition, the spirituality, they still come to my service. When I have service they're not isolated. They have that freedom to go either way, whichever spirituality they want. If they want to embrace both, I encourage them to do so. And I think, for myself, it is so important to have that spirituality. It is the fundamental base of us as a human

being, as a human person. I know it's done wonders for me and my life because I followed my spirituality. I felt I was guided by it and my life has been good."

"And then, if look at what happens in terms of people who are incarcerated and what their needs are, then to me, that's number one. The core is the meaning of life, that meaning of life can be something you draw upon from traditional aspects or from Christian aspects, and they're equally valid in that sense."

"Will we do it? That's the other part of that question. One of the largest keys in working together, and I hear it from everybody, and that's respect. What I think of respect is understanding, understanding each other, understanding that I eat differently than you eat. I speak differently than you speak. I look differently than you look. I respect that. That you're a lousier hockey player than I am, I respect that too. I like that even better."

While many participants talked about the need to respect different approaches, they recognized that while there are many different approaches to bond with the Creator, the journey to spiritual fulfilment is what matters. As one participant noted,

"I read a book by Richard Twist. Twist is a Dakota Sioux pastor from the Rosebud First Nations in South Dakota and he made a statement that's just spoke to my heart. He said, 'Jesus never asked me to divorce myself from being an Indian.' I read that page several times. Jesus wants me to experience my culture through who I am. Back in the 60's and 70's when the Jesus movement started, drums and guitars were brought into the church and now we see that it's common in a lot of places. Why can't people dress into their regalia and bring drum and dance into the church? God is above all cultures, the Creator is above all cultures. He speaks in Cree, Ojibway, or Filipino, or Chinese or whatever, it doesn't matter. You have to listen to the Spirit. If the Spirit tells you, you can to do something, follow it. One person I know said 'Well I go the Sweat Lodge on the Friday and I come to Chapel on the Saturday, is that O.K.?' I said, 'Sure it is.' 'But you're a pastor and you're telling me that's O.K.' And I said, 'Yeah, that's O.K. Who are you seeking inside the Lodge?' 'I pray to Jesus' he said 'What is you heart crying for?' 'My heart is crying for oneness with my Maker.' I said, 'You're on the right path. Don't let anyone tell you that you can't do this because it's between you and the Creator here. That's what it comes down to, you and the Creator. You have to be at peace with who you are.' And he said, 'You drum with us, you smudge with us, you smoke the pipe. Why?' I said, 'Because when I do it, my Maker is right there with me.' He's not giving me the thumbs down, he's giving me the thumbs up. I'm at peace with myself

Blending Christian and Traditional approaches

Probably one of the most contentious issues in literature, and on the Internet, is the blending of traditional and Christian ceremonial practices in Christian services. Some Aboriginal communities, which hold strong Christian beliefs, consider any form of

traditional practice, let alone as part of the church service, as "pagan". Other communities, however, have welcomed the inclusion of traditional symbols and practices, such as the burning of Sweetgrass, into their Christian ceremonies. One author[14] framed the problem as:

> Some Bible Christians see all these signs as being useless at the best and from the devil at worst. They tell us that God does not need this stuff and we do not either. We should just put our faith in Jesus, stick to the Bible, and forget the rest. But, when we turned to the Bible, we see Jesus himself using the humble things of the earth to convey meaning and power and healing. Water is used to baptize and oil to heal. In the Gospel of John (9:6) Jesus even spits on some dirt, makes it into paste, and rubs it onto the blind man's eyes to heal them. Why, when a word would have been enough? He uses ordinary things and still greater ways, changing bread into wine into his own Body and Blood, the greatest Gift of all.
>
> So what about this holy smoke? In the Old Testament to God commands that incense be offered to him every day. (Exodus 30:1-8) David, the great Hebrew king, compares his own prayer to this fragrant some. Let my prayer arise like incense before you. The lifting of my hands like the evening offering. (Psalm 141:1,2).
>
> Certain things that we use in a spiritual way we call sacramentals. Fragrant smoke is one of these sacramentals. It has been used by peoples all over the world for thousands of years. Sweetgrass, sage, cedar, etc. are forms of incense found in many First Nations cultures. It is used as a way of honouring the Creator, as a sign of prayer rising to God, and of this sweetness of prayer. It is a sign of humility (the humbleness of plants) and purity (the purifying effect of fire). Also for Christians, smoke is a reminder of the shining cloud that fails the glory of God.
>
> The Catholic practice of using incense is based on both the Bible and long Christian tradition. God is the author of its use. He does nothing uselessly, and if you ridicule the practice, you ridicule God.

There was no doubt in participants' minds that there was tension between some advocates of Christian and traditional beliefs. They believed that this underlying tension was long-standing and was one of the key barriers to mutual respect. In some cases, particularly with Aboriginal inmates in federal penitentiaries, there was the view that inmates often felt coerced to participate in traditional spiritual practices. Regardless of where that tension comes from and why it has grown over the years, they saw it as being a detriment to choice, respect and healing. As participants noted,

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[14] Lorenz, Rod and Caroline Holy Smoke – from Incense to Sweetgrass. http://www.peace.mb.ca/00.Native/nlrnz06.htm

"In the past there's been hesitancy on both sides entering into the other's sphere of influence, of stepping on toes. In some cases there is a hesitancy of amalgamating what people feel could be parts of each other's process or symbolism to create something that's different but combines what the community thinks is the best of both. I don't have the answer."

"I've heard one thing that surprised me. Maybe it doesn't surprise you and maybe it does. I'm going to pose it as a question. Is there something essentially, is there something at the core of either Christianity or Aboriginal, traditional spirituality that disallows them to participate with one another? I keep hearing this tension. I'm hearing that there's a tension and I don't understand it. It just seems to me so simple and things that seem simple generally are. I'm over simplifying. But what would it look like? Maybe it would look like people putting down their quivers and say, 'O.K. we're not going to fight this out. Let's find the common ground here.' Maybe I've got a mental block here but there seems to be a tension that doesn't seem to be necessary. Maybe somebody could answer whether there's something essential either in Christianity or Aboriginal spirituality that says they can't function together, that they have to be separate programs and separate approaches."

"It's happening in other organizations, other Churches and other denominations. Anywhere where Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal encounter, there is this dynamic of either rejection of one by the other, mutual rejection or one trying to control the other or beat up the other. And the beating up can take many forms. It's verbal, it's emotional, it's psychic, some of it has been going on a long time."

"I know money is paid to guys to put curses on people and have seen Elders abusing ceremonies. That's done. That happens. But you can't write off the whole Indian traditional experience because of the abuses. If that's something that we must do, then I'm going to write off a huge percentage of ministers and preachers, Bible based and otherwise, and priests and nuns and rabbis for the same reason. And all that says is testimony to the human condition that you find imperfection everywhere. The sooner in life you can make your peace with accepting that humans are weak, and there are means and ways of addressing the weaknesses and helping people along, the better."

"I see the barriers sometimes coming from our denominational heads; our Church hierarchy who find out what we're really doing. They pull you in for a nice father-to-son chat and say, 'I don't know you should really be doing that because you are compromising who you are.' That is one of the barriers and the restrictions that can be placed on us. But you see, it's the Spirit who calls in to do whatever he wants us to do. And no matter what Man says, it's the Creator who gives us the marching orders."

"If there is respect for diversity than there has to be inclusion of diversity in terms of spirituality, whatever you want to call it. I think Christianity has to be a part of

that Circle. I mean we live in a pluralistic society. We can't say exclusively it's going to be a Christian based program but people need to have that choice. I think as it is right now, from my perception, there are a lot of incarcerated Aboriginal Christians. They have some Christian background and they feel coerced to participate in traditional ceremonies and they're uncomfortable with that. I think that's wrong. Again getting back to choice, I think people need to have a choice and it can't be just exclusively traditional Aboriginal spirituality. It might not even be Christian-based either. You have to allow the offender to choose the path of healing. You can't dictate it to them. It sort of like what happened to us Aboriginal peoples 100 years ago, 200 years ago. We had Christianity imposed upon us. So I don't think it's either-or. It's both. So there needs to be respect for different traditions and Christianity is another tradition. Aboriginal spirituality is another tradition. If respect is a fundamental value that we all share, it's a common value. We talk a lot about respect. Yet if we're disrespecting another tradition by excluding through policy or whatever. I think that's wrong."

One participant raised an interesting perspective about the background for these tensions, by referring to a book, entitled *The Argument Culture* (DeborahTannen, 1999. Random House). She related the premise of the book as being,

> "I think the question of can Aboriginal and Christian people work together?, I think what we need to do first is understand part of the problem before we can even answer the question. In one of my university courses, we took this book called *The Argument Culture*. In this book it talks about the foundation for how the colonial forces that came in. The pervasive approach was an argument culture. It is still seen today in our political arena where we tear the other political persons down to raise ourselves up. And so, the argument is that culture is very pervasive and along with that is that culture is also very absolute. It's 'I'm right and you're wrong.' That gives birth to the whole ethno-centrism approach. That locus of thinking is pervasive throughout North America and certainly has bled into our Churches. The absolutes, right and wrong. We're spiritual and you're pagan. Those sorts of things are there, unfortunately, and I don't know the answer about how you break free of that and come to a common ground. As well the author talks about the fact that if you do not think like me then I will demonize you. I believe that, that has happened pervasively in our Aboriginal people and somehow we need to break through that."

By accepting the premise that spirituality is essential to successful healing processes and that the way in which an individual expresses that spirituality is a matter of choice, which must be respected, any tension between Christianity and traditional spiritual practices is a barrier to healing. While some participants recognized that those barriers exist, they felt that dialogue leading to a deeper understanding of common values was important. By respecting each other's common goal of healing individuals, families and communities, opportunities can arise to work together. Some participants expressed the view that agreements, or covenants, could be reached between the different parties to divert energy

from maintaining tensions between them and directing that energy to support healing and wellness.

> "If there is an interest and a will based on common values and starting with mutual respect it is possible to work together. If we take the focus off our own approaches to healing and focus instead on the individual, the family and the community and their healing, I think it is possible. There will always be barriers. In an inter-faith context there are different traditions, but there is a way to work together effectively. There are different groups that have put together covenants and agreed. It happens all the time and there is no reason it can't work here."

> "What needs to happen, is that Aboriginal Christian leaders, chaplains, people that go into the prisons and traditionalists need to sit down and work out some kind of covenant and again the focus needs to be not so much themselves but the healing of individuals, families and communities. There are ways to achieve that goal, and different paths to that goal. It can work but again, these people need to sit in a Circle (like this one) and enter into a dialogue to talk about common values, and how we can achieve better relations."

> "I think there always will be barriers. Even in an inter-faith context and inter-faith dialogue. You have different traditions. But I think there is a way to work together ecumenically. You know there are different groups that have put together covenants and they've agreed. It's been a consensus decision-making process where they've agreed that these are the values, these are the principles upon we will work together and cooperate to achieve a goal. It happens all the time, even within evangelical circles, evangelical covenants and ecumenical covenants. It can work."

> "So I think the journey we have to be on from this point begins, as I've heard to my right and to my left, with a deep respect for the differences that are encountered in the other as well as in ourselves. To replace pride and authority with humility and a willingness to learn and be open and listen is key. To be present with the other, to turn the whole self to the other, to take the other in and to ask of the other the same gift. It's at that point, that our differences become, not barriers but opportunities."

One participant, who was arrested and placed in remand with several other Aboriginal accused, shared an example of traditional and Christian practices working in harmony,

> "I got arrested. Fifty-three of us got arrested for this big anti-gang law that they brought up here in Canada. In the evening, we prayed before going to bed. At first there were a couple of us. We prayed with Bible music. We started praying in Jesus' name and some of the Brothers would smudge. A year went by, there would be10 guys in a circle praying in Jesus' name and another 15 guys smudging, all at the same time. It became so spiritual in there. Everybody knew that before going to bed everybody was praying in a circle. Even the guards

came, some joined the smudge and some joined the prayer in Jesus' name. There was no warfare. If you were in there you would understand exactly what I am saying. There was no big wall. If you want to pray that way go ahead, I'll pray that way, go ahead. That's what I experienced while I was in there."

Identity and respect

Many participants recognized that both Christian and traditional approaches to healing individuals and communities need to focus on the issue of their identity as Aboriginal people. An individual needs to find his or her "place" within him or herself, within their families and communities and between the individual and the Creator. Without that grounding, a person cannot find true meaning to life and cannot begin a healing journey.

Participants at the Gathering stated that belief in a number of ways, including,

> "When you look at what happens in terms of people who are incarcerated and what their needs are, at the core of it all is the meaning of life. That meaning can be something you draw upon from Traditional aspects or from Christian aspects, and they're equally valid in that sense. There's also the element of identity, which was brought up, critical to healing these two things are essential to healing."

> "Both sides are changing attitudes and approaches, toward a more restorative approach. We have several restorative justice programs and projects where one deals with the entire family. One has been successful to the point where one individual was found innocent, not guilty, in court; he did not have to do anything. He went back and entered the program anyway with his family. As far as the Aboriginal Christian part of it, we started looking from the premise that healing is necessary for people to become good human. Secondly, spirituality, whatever that spirituality may be, is the foundational part of healing. I can see how the traditional, spiritual practices have affirmed our identity and of course many Aboriginal people are in search of themselves and are going back to the whole traditional spirituality and culture and I'm not threaten by that as a Christian. I'm not threatened by that, at all."

> "I would have to say, just in general, any spirituality, call it traditional Aboriginal spirituality, call it Christianity, any spirituality, any generic spirituality that affirms and celebrates identity is going to be successful. In a Christian context what we're learning is that if we're going to reach are people with the Gospel that we need to be culturally relevant, we need to celebrate our Aboriginal identity. That, in and of itself, is going to contribute to the process of healing."

There was a strong affirmation by the participants that any individual or community healing approach should recognize that the focus should be on the individual, and that the individual should have the choice as to whether to follow a traditional or Christian path to

healing. Regardless of which approach is chosen, their choice should be accorded the respect that it is due.

> "How do you honour a person's choice within the context of prison where frequently the people that we're dealing with are, might I say, a little bit less flexible then in another context. There are a couple thoughts that linger in my heart with respect to this question of whether or not Christians and traditionalists can work together to help the individual, family, and community. I said, 'No', definitely, absolutely, imperatively, absolutely not. Then I said, 'Yes', absolutely they can. Then I thought, 'Well, with God all things are possible.' Then I thought, the Scripture says, 'How can two walk together less they agree together?' There's the mission, and the mandate and the vision, these things would dictate whether or not it is possible for the two to work together."

The group recognized that there are real differences between peoples' spiritual beliefs and this can create discord in families and communities. There was general consensus, however, that those differences should not get in the way of recognizing an ultimate goal of spirituality is healing.

The need for dialogue

Pope John Paul II advocated this view in his address to the Interreligious Assembly on October 28, 1999 when he expressed great joy at the development of interreligious relations and encouraged the furtherance of such dialogue and action for the sake of humankind. He said, "The task before us is therefore to promote a culture of dialogue. Individually and together, we must show how religious belief inspires peace, encourages solidarity, promotes justice and upholds liberty." He also said, "Greater mutual esteem and growing trust must lead to still more effective and coordinated common action on behalf of the human family."

When asked whether Aboriginal people and Christians, traditionalists and Christians can work together, the responses included,

> "I would say yes. I think that if we were to bring some issues forward, try to address them and maybe agree to disagree on some things. For example, I'm not happy that you chant and do sweats. I do Communion and I sing Amazing Grace and that works for me. But if we can agree to disagree on those things and find commonalities to work with it would be possible."

> "One analogy that might help provide some perspective is the idea of a couple going through divorce. If the parents want things to go well for their children they will leave behind a lot of their differences so that the family can continue growing in a good, healthy way. And in a way, I think sometimes with different groups from different faiths, different practices, we have to leave aside some of our partisans, our misgivings, etc., take the best of each other for the healing and

for the wholesomeness of the ones that we know are hurting and need someone to be caring for them."

"It's important to realize that it's about working together, not about praying together. The Pentecostal is not going to say 'Amen' when the Wicken prays to their God. The Sikh is not going to kneel down and say, 'This is what I believe' when the Rabbi prays. No. But they don't get scared of each other and walk out of the room anymore. That's what this is about, that's what the message is here. You have to understand what each other believe. You don't have to believe it but you have to understand what it is you don't agree with because it will help a lot in working together to achieve the final goal.

"It is possible, you know, that people who hate each other can listen to each other and come not to hate each other any more. They may not agree with each other and they're not all going to become Muslims or Jews. They're not all going to become anything different. They just don't hate each other anymore and they can work together. And maybe that's part of the picture that you need to look at is how can we not hate each other and understand each other, not fear each other."

Throughout the two days of the Gathering, one theme continued to arise. While those adherents to formalized religions or those following non-structured spiritualism may express their faith differently, there is only one Creator. Whether called God, Allah, Jehovah or the Great Spirit, only the names used by humans are different and not the belief in a higher power. Participants summed up this view by saying,

"It's like an Amusement Park where there are bumper cars. They bump; but where do they get their power from – the same roof. They're all steering around trying to manoeuvre, they keep on bumping but they forget where they get their power. A guy who did time in Kingston told me that. It makes a lot of sense. Amusement Park rides can run out of fuses, religion too. But these bumper cars they don't have to. There's all these people hang on to this bumper car and then they get knocked and then they go to another car for a while and they go back and forth. But they forget where they their power comes from."

"So I think the journey we have to be on from this point begins, as I've heard to my right and to my left, with a deep respect for the differences that I encounter in the other as well as in myself. To replace pride and authority with humility and a willingness to learn and be open and listen. To be present to the other, to turn my whole self to the other and to take the other in and to ask of the other the same gift to me. It's at that point, I think, that our differences become, not barriers but opportunities."

CHAPTER FOUR: RECOGNIZING DIFFERENCES

Christianity as a European Religion

Some participants viewed Christianity as a European religion, with European-based ceremonies and practices. This, they saw, was foreign to Aboriginal approaches to spirituality. One could visualize the differences based on two Biblical images. Christianity could be likened to Jacob's ladder where climbing up towards Heaven attains spiritual fulfillment. One can visualize this ascendancy as individuals being ranked above or below each other with higher status given to those who have climbed higher up the ladder. Aboriginal spirituality, on the other hand, could be likened to Sarah's circle where all individuals are seen as equal, supportive of each other and collectively reaching for spiritual support.

Christian and many Aboriginal creation stories support these differences as well. In Genesis creation was ordered in such a way as to give human beings dominion over God's other creations. In Aboriginal creation stories, the order of creation – the land, vegetation, animals and finally human beings – was required since each successive creation was dependant upon the previous ones. Man was not the strongest of God's creations but the weakest. Human beings require each of God's other creations to be healthy for him or her to survive.

Comments from the participants about the European focus of Christianity included,

> "The reason I believe that Traditional healing practices are successful is that a spirituality that is inclusive of identity is a holistic spirituality. When we look at the history of Christianity, it's been more of a mono-cultural representation of Christianity. A European representation of Christianity that was imposed upon Indigenous peoples. So, there's been a disconnection historically with the celebration of identity."

> "An Aboriginal minister who is a friend of mine shared this with me. He asked, 'How could such a spiritual people, First Nations People, reject the Gospel'. His response was 'They haven't rejected the Gospel, they've rejected the European trappings of the Gospel.' And I think Christianity has to take some responsibility for this. Many of our Aboriginal people today are going through a major identity crises, our whole society is going through a major identity crisis. Many of our people don't know who they are and so there is a disconnection with their core identity. Because their core identity is damaged or fragmented, it affects all the other areas of their life."

> "As the last participant had issues with the word spirituality, I have issues with the word Christianity because, in this continent, I believe that the Gospel message that has been brought to our people had a Euro-centred approach to it. And in actuality, and I will be very candid, I believe that a great violence has been done

to the Scriptures by Euro-Christianity and that our people have been oppressed, they've been isolated, they've been stereo-typed, racism has been put upon them and believe me, I go to Church and I'm an ordained minister but I want to be honest and candid, if we're going to look for answers let us at least start at the truth. I believe as my fellow participant said yesterday he feels safer in prison than he does in church and I think that I often feel very unsafe in churches."

"My next thought is, 'Is Christ relevant and should Christ be brought into the prisons?' I say yes. I think there needs to be an understanding that Aboriginal people have a different world view of society. They see Creator, they see creation and it's a flat line. They see humanity, they see animals, the plants and the trees and they have a relationship. It's not that they worship it. It's that they are part of creation and they approach it differently. So then, when we go in the Euro-Christianity environment its very hierarchal and it starts and it flows down and there are lesser people as you go down and of course Aboriginal people, as a rule, sit at the bottom of that and of course that is not a good thing."

"From the beginning of creation God has placed in each culture the DNA of who he is. We know innately that there is somebody, something greater than ourselves that created us. Before Christianity we worshipped something. We worshipped God and every tribe has a different name for it. In North America there are some hundreds of tribes and they come with their own personal expression of worship to God. Does Christianity fit into this? I would say yes and no. I have issues with the word Christianity because, in this continent, I believe that the Gospel message that has been brought to our people had a Euro-centred approach to it. And in actuality, and I will be very candid, I believe that a great violence has been done to the Scriptures by Euro-Christianity. Our people have been oppressed. They've been isolated, they've been stereotyped. Racism has been put upon them, and believe me, I go to Church and I'm an ordained minister, I want to be honest and candid. If we're going to look for answers let us at least start at the truth. I often feel very unsafe in churches. I see the blood before I go in often because I never know what I'm going to get. I say that with great sadness, I'm not happy to say that, but that is the truth."

"I would then like to rephrase this question. 'Is Christ relevant and should Christ be brought into the prisons?' I would say yes. Because an authentic relationship with Christ is where it is. That's the bottom line. It is the Cross. It is his Love. It is the finished work. And so that is the place that we need to start. Part of that I think when we look at expressions of worship and how we would blend that in. I think there needs to be an understanding that Aboriginal people have a different world view of society. They see Creator, they see creation and it's a flat line. They see humanity, they see animals, the plants and the trees and they have a relationship. It's not that they worship it. It's that they are part of creation and they approach it differently. So then, when we go in the Euro-Christianity environment. Its very hierarchal. It starts and it flows down and there are lesser

people has you go down. And of course Aboriginal people, as a rule, sit at the bottom of that, which is not a good thing."

"All the Christian groups that I can tell, and most notably the Roman Catholics which is the one I'm most familiar with, are guilty of imperialism and colonialism. They're telling the Indians, Inuit, and people who are different who they are. I don't know how to say that any differently, but that's colonialism. Telling you how you are."

While many participants felt that there was a strong Euro-centric bias in Christianity, others did not agree. They recognized that Christianity came to Canada from Europe but were able to see that Christianity, and western culture, had benefits as well. The problem was often how to reconcile their beliefs with those of others. As participants noted,

"But yet, on the other side of the coin, being involved with many different Native organizations, and working with them, I had an Elder sit down with me and tell me, 'What we need to do is get rid of everything of the European influence, everything that has anything to do with the European influence at all and we're going to be better people.' and I thought, 'Wow man, when I sit on the toilet, I really like to flush that thing. I don't want to lose that.' It just goes to show that if we only directly look at one and focus on it without looking at everything else around us, then we lose what we've been taught."

"I also have met traditionalists who tell me that Christian faith is not good, it's white. It's a white religion. To those I have no message. I have no communication. I just keep quiet. I can't fight for God. At times people say, I'm bringing the Word of God, so that I'm defending God. We must never forget. God existed from the beginning. He is still here. I will die. He will still go on. I can't fight for him. He does well revealing Himself to all Nations. He does well. But it is how I can reflect the Love and bring people together to help each other to glorify Him. I think that's what is very important."

Prosletization

Some participants raised the different approaches in speaking about an individual's spirituality and spiritual practice. While it was noted that Christian churches have a long history of actively seeking coverts, Aboriginal people saw spirituality as a highly personalized part of their lives.

"I think for myself about Christianity, healing, listening to the Elders. But this is where I get kind of confused. In the Bible Jesus told us to go spread the good news to the people and traditional Elders tell us to keep our dreams and visions to ourselves, only some of them can be shared. As Native people, we are very quiet when we do our ceremonies for our own healing, like the Sun Dance, the piercing, and the fasting. We keep that quiet out of respect for what the Creator has told us.

> When I do that I don't share what happens to me when I do a Fast or participate in Sun Dance ceremonies. That's our healing as Aboriginal people."
>
> "In Christianity we have confession, fasting also, abstinence from meat and water. So it's very similar in our healing process, but we are told to share it with everyone."

One participant felt that Christian churches were sometimes focusing on the wrong approach to sharing the Good Word. They had lost the focus of their mission, which was to bring people into Christ and not just culture. Directions given in the Bible to share the Word of God does not differentiate people by race, culture or nationality. Rather they are all-inclusive. He said,

> "One of our problems is we tried to assimilate people into western culture but not into Christ. What's important is that we assimilate people into Christ and the ultimate thing of Christ is love and sharing with others. It is not how I dress, how I eat, how I sleep, how I shit. The importance is that love and that sharing. It's important when I go out now that that I always say 'we', because God is always there and without him we couldn't do anything. When we go out and whether we're at Indian institutions or on the streets, or whatever, all we're doing is we're sharing a message. In Matthew 28, 19 God said to us, or Jesus said in his own words, 'Go out and make disciples of all nations, baptise them in the name of the Father, Son and the Holy Spirit.' He didn't say get White people for the White Church, get Indian people for the Indian Church, German people for the German Church. He said get all people baptise them in the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. He created us all equals and that's the message that we have to take out. The importance of this is that we're only seed planters. We bring that message out and we let the Holy Spirit take it. We let the Holy Spirit grow with it. We let the Holy Spirit bring people to the Truth. Christian healing is an important part of what we're looking at today. But the term in there is 'Christ'. It is the important part of the healing process of our people. The methodology is what we have to work on, the ideology is great."

For Aboriginal Christians, the sharing of their beliefs with others can lead to problems within their families and communities. As one participant noted, often these individuals are met with mistrust and antagonism.

> "I investigated being Christian. I did studies and everything. Before I became Christian, I was traditional. My family were all traditional people. There's got to be a place out here for the guys that meet the Lord. You can go back home and everything, the ones who have family that are Christians but what about the ones that never experienced that in their families, they're going back to community. I like to go and talk about the Lord to my brothers and sisters and then they think I'm crazy. 'What's happening with you?' They thought I shaking it rough while I was in there. Well there's a lot of fighting too that's what he's seen, cultural

fighting. As soon as I tried to learn about that, it was spiritual warfare. Everyone saying don't believe that; don't believe this, don't believe that."

"The Creator is the Father of all nations. We as Native People, I was taught by one Elder, when we get our call, it comes through dreams or sickness and we have to pay attention to that. When Christianity comes into our community, they need to respect what we already believe in."

It's Not Easy Being Aboriginal and Christian

Over the past two decades a number of Aboriginal-controlled service and counseling organizations have emerged across Canada to provide healing to Aboriginal clients addressing issues such as substance abuse, family violence, parenting, depression, suicide, anger or support during periods of loss. In most cases, these organizations have based their treatment and counseling approaches on traditional spirituality. This poses some problems to those Aboriginal people who follow a Christian path. Conversations at the Gathering included the views that,

"All I'm asking is to give our people that choice. Give them a choice. Not just assume that because they are First Nations People that you're going to have to regain your traditional forms. That's O.K. if those people want to do that."

"I'm not really a speaker but I feel that there are things that I have to say. As I said last night I went to treatment myself, thirteen years ago, twelve years, something like that, and when I went to this treatment centre that's the first thing they said to me was that I had to learn the traditional ways because I was Christian. I didn't know any other way."

"I tried to go to the sweats; I tried to do the smudging. I just felt so uncomfortable in the sweats that I had to get out. I even tried the second week, 'If I can only get in there, I'll be Indian.' I always knew I was Indian but I had to be like them. So I thought well this time I've got to tear it right down, I've got to build it right from scratch."

"I knew that there was counsellor inside that was Christian, just like me. She told me, 'You know, you don't need to go in there, you don't have to do any of it. You can pray anywhere.' I knew all that, but I felt because I was in that place I had to do what they asked me to do."

"I stayed on in this place; I didn't want to leave because I felt I could really help people. I knew that there were a lot of Native people that were scared of the Traditional ways that are scared of being Christian, so I offer it to them. When I talk to them, we talk about God. That's good. But once they get out there, they don't want to talk about God any more. So I kept encouraging to speak of God and I feel in my heart that as time went on for me I learned about traditional ways. I know how to smudge. Yeah, the sweat's not good for me, but that's O.K. but I

> do smudge. I don't put it down. I don't put anything down like that and I know I don't want anybody to put Christianity down because that's my life too."

It was noted that Aboriginal Christians who are incarcerated in federal institutions also experience problems. Under the *Corrections and Conditional Release Act* S.C. 1992 c. 20, the Correctional Service of Canada is required to provide a range of programs designed to address the needs of offenders and contribute to their successful reintegration into the community. Aboriginal spirituality, Aboriginal spiritual leaders and Elders have been given the same status as other religions and other religious leaders and the Service is to take all reasonable steps to make available to Aboriginal inmates the services of an Aboriginal spiritual leader or Elder.

To ensure that Aboriginal offenders are provided with an equitable opportunity to practice their culture and traditions without discrimination, and with an opportunity to implement traditional Aboriginal healing practices, all operational units accommodating Aboriginal offenders are required to provide traditional social, cultural and spiritual programs to all identified Aboriginal offenders. Institutional wardens, following consultation with Aboriginal inmates, Elders and communities, are required to make arrangements for one or more Elders to provide spiritual leadership, including teaching, counseling and the conduct of traditional ceremonies, to Aboriginal inmates (Commissioner's Directive 702 #27). There is not a comparable policy with respect to Aboriginal inmates choosing to follow a Christian approach. This was recognized by several participants who said,

> "If healing is the common goal but if different routes are taken by different people, is the goal to support healing or to support an approach to healing? An approach to healing that CSC has taken right now is to use traditional Aboriginal culture, values and spirituality Is this an effective choice for healing offenders? As we have seen in discussion, it maybe for some, not for all. So if the goal is healing then the issue of choice and opportunity has to be dealt with."

> "The model for healing in terms of Aboriginal offenders has been exclusively traditional Aboriginal spirituality. As we heard some of the different people that shared this morning that it's almost coercive because if you don't participate in the Aboriginal specific programming within the institution than you are deemed as not participating in the healing process."

> "Choice is key but I would say that even if it's not a policy of the institution that most inmates would probably feel pressured to participate. It happens that inmates feel pressure to participate in ceremonies that they aren't comfortable with because it's the norm."

Not All Participants Agreed that "Organized" Spirituality was Essential

A view was expressed at the Gathering that organized religion, and efforts to standardize Aboriginal spiritual practices, were contrary to the goal of healing individuals. Rather, an individual's spirituality comes from within and does not require structure or ceremony.

> "As a Christian, I made difference in the society. My people are richer than they were before. When in my life I did not know where to go, I knew it had to do with a personal relationship with Christ. It had nothing to do with Church. I hate religion, I don't care what form it is because religion can bind you; traditions can bind you; but I knew about a personal relationship with Christ. In walking with Christ, you can be filled with the Holy Ghost. He can direct you. You'll know the voice of God. You'll know exactly what to do. You'll know exactly where your strength comes from and you can walk in that power and his might. That's why I was able to do things I never even dreamed of; because I dared to do things I've never done before. Because I knew who I was. I had no identity problem."

> "Spirituality is a hindrance. Spirituality should never be involved. Spirituality is not of God, spirituality is not of Christ. It never was, never meant to be, and never will be. Spirituality is the worst; religion is the worst. When we look at spirituality, it is foreign. Religion is foreign. The reason I say that is because I have to base my reasoning on some foundation, base it on something. I base it on Scripture. I base it on the Word of God. The Word of God tells me that spirituality is the worst. It's not of God. The reason why is because Jesus, himself, cursed spirituality. He cursed religion. He cursed the Scribes and the Pharisees because they adhered to things that were traditional; things that were really nonessential and unimportant. In fact Jesus said it's not the things that go into the body that defile a body, but the things that proceeded out of the heart of man. So, he was talking about spirituality, and he was saying, in essence, that it's out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaketh. How does the heart proceed to things that are misbehaviours? And He said that it's within the heart of the person that these things come out. And so the problem in our society, the problem with us as human beings, and those that are incarcerated, is a problem of the heart. It's a heart problem. Never forget it. It's a heart problem. To deal with a heart problem, religion will not resolve it, spirituality will not resolve it. What will resolve it is Jesus Christ and a relationship with Jesus Christ first and foremost?"

> "So my thought again is that spirituality is a hindrance, that's my belief. Spirituality, tradition, religiosity, it's a curse and not ought not to be. I believe that again it's a matter of the heart and the only thing can resolve a matter of heart is the Lord, Jesus Christ."

> "But I'm just going to leave it there and say again that I don't think that its religion. I don't think that it's necessarily a higher power or that it's spirituality that is the answer. It is the Lord, Jesus Christ. Jesus, when he opened the book in the temple and said, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he had anointed me to preach the Gospel to the poor, sent me to heal the broken hearted, to set at

liberty those that are bruised and to preach recovery of sight to the blind.' What is needed is the message of Jesus Christ and the power of Jesus Christ to set the captives free and recover sight to the blind. And that's what you and I, are called to do as well."

CHAPTER FIVE: ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN APPROACHES TO HEALING

Christianity is both diverse and evolving

Both Aboriginal traditional spirituality and the Christian Faith have been, and continue to evolve over time and place. Traditional practices, which were once found only amongst Plains First Nations, are now seen across Canada. Pipe ceremonies, Sun Dances and Sweat Lodge ceremonies have been adopted and adapted by individuals and Nations who are searching for tangible ways to express themselves spiritually. In all cases, individuals are searching for a spiritual centre and have sought out those beliefs and practices that guide them towards that centre.

Christianity is neither a stagnant nor monolithic faith and is in constant debate with itself about change. For example, Christianity was witnessed schisms throughout its history. The separation of the Catholic and Eastern Orthodox Churches in the 11th Century, the development of Protestantism in the 16th Century and the evolution of Fundamentalism are just a few examples. The role for women in religious practices has evolved or is being debated in many denominations. Changes, which seemed quite radical at the time, are now accepted as part of mainstream Church practices.

In both traditional Aboriginal spirituality and the Christian faith, the interpretation of faith is most often left to the Elders, priests or ministers who are seen as having special knowledge and abilities relating to their faith. Depending on the individual teacher or leader, certain practices and elements of their faith can be emphasized over others and spirituality can be emphasized over other parts of one's life. The interpretation of faith by an Elder, priest or minister can result in either opening or closing doors to change and evolution.

As discussed earlier around the issue of using Sweetgrass as part of Christian services, the opening of doors to elements of Aboriginal spiritual practices within Christian ceremonies, or rituals, is of particular concern to many Aboriginal Christians. On the one hand, some view this practice as being respectful of Aboriginal cultures and the use of traditional practices within Church services a natural and comfortable addition to Christian rituals. On the other hand, still others see this practice as co-opting Aboriginal traditional spirituality.

The full range of these views was expressed at the Gathering. One participant felt that

> "All we need to do is go out with the simple, message of Christ, not a denominational faith, not a doctrinal background if we just teach the Bible, the Bible teaches truth. Simple enough for me. Here's the beliefs Christ wanted you to have, pure and simple: He loves you. He died for you. You believe in him. Go to different Churches, when you find one where you feel real happy and you feel that you're at home, yeah, then you're home. That's where you practice your

belief in Christ. Then you take it and share it with others. So that's what I see as a good Christian based program that would work. Just leave it to Christ. Don't put our own personal stuff into it."

Still other participants expressed the need to celebrate one's Aboriginal identity within his or her faith. In essence, they believed that the expression of Aboriginal culture was an expression of faith. They noted that,

> "I think that's changing. I think within a Christian context many Aboriginal Christians, have been struggling with this whole issue related to Aboriginal identity and culture and its relevance for faith. I strongly believe that our Aboriginal identity is now being recognized as an integral part of our healing. I don't believe you can be healed when your core identity is fragmented because your core identity is who you are, who God created you to be. God created me Saulteaux, Anishanabee, and for almost half of my life I was almost totally disconnected from my Aboriginal identity and my Aboriginal culture. Then I came to faith. I had a conversion experience and I became a Christian and there was still that disconnection with my Aboriginal identity and culture even as a Christian. But, as a part of my own spiritual journey, I came to the realization that, and I was going through a healing process myself, I came to the realization that God created me an Indian (pardon the expression) and I need to celebrate my Indianness and my culture in the context of my faith."

> "Our local church for example, has been on a journey and we're incorporating drumming and dancing with regalia. We want to incorporate as much of our culture as we can as Aboriginal people and use that as a means to glorify God and to reach our people and sing a new song on the drum. When we dance, every step is a prayer and it's amazing. This is since about 1998 it's relatively new. But I can see, just even in the faces of our people and even people from the community that visit our local church, how responsive they are when they hear the singing and the drumming and the dancing and the regalia and it brings healing and it's brought healing into my own life."

As the group began to discuss the role of Christianity in both individual and community healing, two general themes began to emerge although there was insufficient time to reach a possible consensus. A key theme that arose was that, while there may be different ways one could express his or her faith, the important element for healing is that the individual believes in a higher existence that can support him or her through their healing journeys. The other general theme was that it is important neither to force one's belief on another nor to make judgemental comparisons about how one expresses that belief. As participants noted,

> "The question is: 'Does Christianity play a role in the healing process?' So my answer is yes, it's very important. The ideology is great. I think it's the methodology that we have to look at. How do we approach it? How do we get in there? They said I can't follow Christ if I follow my own ways. And I said in all

the teachings I learned about Christ never did he force his love upon us. He shared it and gave us the option. We can do what ever we want. I think if we let people be who they are, our communities will heal."

"Building on what people have already said, I think spirituality or spiritual belief is, from my own experience, absolutely essential because it's the basis of the meaning of life. If you don't have a spiritual belief, I believe the world will be in chaos, and not order. There's no place for you in it and there's no meaning for living it. So just to add that to the discussion, it seems to me it is essential to the healing because it is the basis of the meaning of life."

Acceptance and synthesis

A number of participants felt that an acceptance, and possible synthesis, of different beliefs could come from a more thorough understanding of those beliefs. As participants stated,

"When the White people came to our community, they came and they visited us and they saw us do our ceremonies. One ceremony they saw was when an Elder past away. The White people saw us put food in the bush and the White man asked, 'How come you put food in the bush? Dead people can't eat food.' So the Elder sat for a while quietly, and said, 'My white brother, I understand and I see that you put flowers on graves. Can dead people smell flowers?' So we have to understand the reason why we do these certain ceremonies in life. We have to understand and respect each other's differences."

"More than one old-timer told me, 'You know why we converted to Christianity so easy. We already had those teachings.' The stories are there. Of course they're not written down, there are no living witnesses to render testimony but we do know that stories, legends, myths always had a nugget or two in them. Somewhere they carry an aspect of the truth. We know that. So back to my concern about traditions, I worried that we will throw out the nuggets, the baby with the bath water."

"I make that personal reference only to point out that when it come to psycho therapy, when it comes to healing in a Christian sense or healing in a traditional sense it's not a necessary comparison. I don't see why we want to compare the two because all of that right now, the last 50, 60 years, the power teachers, the power Elders, men and women, the good hard working Elders in our prisons are Christians. They have the synthesis worked out. You're asking what it should look like? I'm telling what it looks like because it already exists."

It has been noted in literature that "a "pre-packed" westernized gospel has not and does not work in ministry to Indigenous people. In looking to the future and considering developing and implementing successful approaches to ministry to Aboriginal people, it

is imperative that Western Christianity become educated on the issues surrounding the use of contextualization as an approach to reaching Indigenous peoples"[15].

> "Contextualization means becoming identified with the opposing party and requires breaking through cultural barriers in order to establish communication. Through the incarnation of Christ, God crossed a rather large "cultural gap" to seek man, and identify with man, by actually becoming a man. God took on our context, and in doing so, He broke through two barriers that kept man from having a relationship with Him."[16]

Participants at the Gathering felt that Aboriginal Christian faith providers are able to contextualize their faith and can bring their identity and experiences to bear in making their ministries both understood and acceptable to Aboriginal people. It was noted that

> "We just saw this in chaplaincy happen a few months back where we had a First Nations pastor who's working off a reserve in Saskatchewan, he's going into and out of Saskatchewan Penitentiary. He goes into the penitentiary with some regularity, once or twice a week. He would go and work with the chaplain for a while and hold a service or two. As soon as the First Nations offenders saw him, they didn't ask him what religion he was. They recognized somebody of similar culture and immediately began to bond with him and they began a dialogue. It goes back to skin colour and identity that was mentioned earlier but I think that's so powerful."

> "I shared with you last night that I was a residential school student that I had a good experience. Not just myself because there were 600 students in the Residential School I went to and a lot of them had a good experience. So we need to focus on that also and not always dwell on the negative part. What I tell the inmates is that if you do not go beyond that hurt, you will never grow. Sure, heal but try to look on the positive side of where you have come from and where you're going. Someone said that a person with an experience is never at the mercy of some one with a theory. Experience speaks a lot, and I think we can learn from experience if we're open-minded."

> "When I work with Aboriginal people, I go with the whole idea of embedding culture and coming to worship God through our culture and the whole contextualization of it. In this city there are 11 Aboriginal churches. Now for the most part you would not know they were Aboriginal because there is not a feather; there is not a drum; there is not a chant; there is not a rattle; there is not a song. They think White and they worship white. I'm saying this respectfully, I just want to get my approach across to you. The only way you know they are Aboriginal is that there are brown faces sitting in the pews. Having groups

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[15] Keith, Anita L. Rise UP! Shaping the future of Indigenous Ministry though cross-cultural partnership, 2004, p.21.

[16] Studebaker, John. "Building Bridges for the Gospel," Probe Ministries 1900 Firman Drive, Suite 100, Richardson, TX 7508, (1972) 5.

> coming and meet with me and say, 'Will you work with us?' I say, 'Absolutely.' And they say, 'You know, there are other Aboriginal churches in the city.' I make it very plain, I say, 'Look, as far as they are concerned, I'm a pagan, I'm demonized, I'm this hideous person to them.' And I'm fine with that because I know the call that God has on my life and I walk it out. We have these pervasive views that have filtered through society."

The discussion was summed up by participants who said,

> "I think we have a role; the present time calls us to a role, both as Christians and those with traditions in their lives, we all have culture in our life, to try to understand each other and to confess how we've injured each other and to begin a new journey of healing."

> "I've often felt in my heart that if we're Aboriginal-traditional or we're Christian, if we're concerned about the person, or the community or whatever, then we look at the holistic approach and we bring everything together that's going to work to help those people, with their healing. To me that is a holistic approach."

Healing in institutions

Given the evolution of restorative justice within the Aboriginal and faith communities, it was not surprising that the discussion turned to the nature of penitentiaries and their role as a punitive institution. While some participants felt that prisons and penitentiaries should be closed entirely, others believed that they should, at a minimum, reflect restorative and healing approaches.

> "At least when I read the story of the act of creation in the Garden of Eden, there was no bars. It said that God came down in the cool of the evening and walked with Adam and Eve. And it's always been the desire of God to walk with his creation in freedom."

> "From a holistic perspective we ask our inmates to go into an institution under a retributive paradigm where they're being punished and then ask them to attend restorative programs, I think that needs to change into something restorative across the board."

> "So my vision is this. Based on that example which is unprofitable, to try to make a profitable example out of it. I believe we should set a date now as a people, as a government, as a nation, to close our prisons. Whether it be 20 years, or 50 years or 100 years from now, just set a date for the closure of prisons on the basis that prisons were originally designed during the 18th century, in the age of enlightenment, as places for penitence. That's why we call them penitentiaries. They were designed to take folks who were having trouble in community and give them a space for reflection and amendment of life. And after some time of

working profitably, of learning and growing in the Spirit, to be then released on their new life."

"We have taken prisons and penitentiaries however and have used them in a very different way. By setting a date for the closure of prisons, I think we would then begin a new journey of creative, restorative responses to each other so that the community could take back the need for healing, and take back the need to respond to one another in new ways; so we could be on the journey of becoming truly the kind of community that we were intended to be; which is the community of the children of God."

"We would certainly want to see the Correctional Service of Canada move towards a restorative model. They have put in place a number of policies that impact on Aboriginal people. There are actual, specific provisions in the Corrections Act that provide the Elders with the same status as other religious leaders inside and allow communities to assume responsibility for the care and custody of offenders. A number of healing lodges have evolved across Canada to implement that. It also talks about there being Aboriginal programs in institutions based on traditional culture and spirituality."

"As it is now, their needs are secondary. Do we ask the offender when he's in prison, 'What are your needs? What is it that we can do?' Do we bathe them in that love and treat them like the sacred human beings they are and denounce the crime but honour the person? We do not and so, their needs are secondary and they should be primary."

"We are trying to move the correctional system, the corrections process, both in communities and institutions, towards something that meets the needs of offenders wanting to heal. We also want to restore balance in the community and that's another context of the Christian belief, which is the underlay or the platform. What would it look like? Joe says it wouldn't look any different because it's already been practised right now."

With respect to offenders, a number of participants noted that these individuals are at different stages of their healing journey be it along a traditional path or a Christian path. As one participant said,

"One of the questions that comes to me came from offenders that we work with in the North is the very structure of programming. If somebody is on the beginning of a Christian journey and is in an Aboriginal program in prison, and that program always begins with smudging, he may not be comfortable with that. What we were being told was that if you were not comfortable you can't be part of the program. Offenders had to opt out of that program and go towards a different program. I'd love for us to sit down and just have some dialogue about how this can happen within the context of prisons. You could have a culturally-sensitive program in place with a role for spirituality within that program. It could serve

the needs of a diverse group of offenders who may be comfortable of some aspects of spirituality and not others and yet benefit by the cultural component of the programming. This could happen even though they're not comfortable with traditional spirituality. The one thing I have heard is that there's strong affirmation for is choice and respect. How do you honour that within the context of prison where frequently the people that we're dealing with are, might I say, a little bit less flexible then in another context?"

Denounce the behaviour but not the person

In discussions about both institutions and communities, participants generally agreed that a healing approach could denounce the behaviour but not the person. An offender's crime should be seen as an incident in that person's life that was often the result of deeper issues that needed to be addressed. Participants spoke to this issue and said,

> "I say yes. Aboriginal people do not see sin as a wrong thing but as a deviation from the cultural expectations and the responsibilities that are in that community. And I think that those are strong points. An ethics teacher would ask us what is good. For an individual Aboriginal person, good is long life, good health and happiness. And it's being in proper relationship with all people and with God. I think that's an important thing that Aboriginal people bring to the community and it's a place where, when an offender comes back into the community, they are welcomed home. They are lifted up and they are not denounced and put down. I think that's an important value and if we could somehow create that kind of atmosphere of kinship which is extremely important to Aboriginal people, if we can bring that in our prisons and cease with the isolation and the denouncing and realize that each person is sacred and needs to be lifted up high. Denounce the behaviour, yes, but not the person."

> "More to what we can have in communities as an alternative to people going into prisons. Or having a community process that allows them to come out safely earlier and work on community healing. So when we talk about a healing process in a community, it has a philosophical approach and, what we found so far, that communities that take on community healing believe that all people are good, all human beings are basically good people. Sometimes they do things that aren't good. So the goal of healing is to not punish the offender, the person for what they done that's bad, but to go back and look at what caused them to go off the good road as an individual. Then communities need be able to be part of a process that repairs the harm that the individual's done. So that's what we work with in the communities. It seems to be the fundamental, philosophical approaches to healing. Somehow an act has created an imbalance in the community, an imbalance in the family or an imbalance between two people. So how do we re-create that balance between the parties that have been injured and the parties that injured?"

One author summed up the reality of that underlying issue by stating, "Living and ministering in an inner city neighborhood, where the majority of our neighbors are First Nations, we see on a daily basis, first hand what this damage looks like. In the face of poverty, abuse, racism, and so much more, the deepest wound we discover is that of a confused and lost identity. As much as we minister to the symptoms of these wounds, true healing will not be achieved without dealing with the cause. The solution, however, is not as simple as we might expect."[17]

This view was supported at the Gathering by one person who said,

> "The offender has made a bad choice, whatever that is. They've committed a crime and ended up in prison. I would suspect that this one choice was only the result of many bad choices along the way. They have a history of making bad choices. Would it not make sense that the arms that couch them then would lead them into a path of good choices? So, why do we make them powerless in prison, with no choices? Then when they leave the prison system, they have not learned good choice-making? It's sort of been aborted along the way, because all the choices are made for them. They get out of the system, and they sort of pick up where they left off. So, I would advocate for empowerment, for where we can give them choices. Let's do that."

One individual had a vision for the justice system that was truely transformative. He shared that vision with the Gathering and said,

> "I just read in the paper of a 74 year old man who sexually interfered with a teenage boy. The judge said, 'To show the importance of society for the crime you committed we're going to send you away for four years to a place of solitude and isolation, the penitentiary.' What the judge could have said is: 'Because you have done this important thing in society which we do not accept, I'm sentencing you to be responsible for your actions. I'm sentencing you to make amends for what you've done, and I'm sentencing you to live in the community in a healthy way. That wasn't said. But if we said we're going to close the correctional system down, we would have to develop a system where the community could take its own responsibility back. We've given it away. We'd have to reform the whole criminal justice system from the intake of people, to the judges who pass sentence, to the places we keep people and to the probation systems. We shouldn't isolate them and we shouldn't put them away and then have to deal with them when they get back out."

Another participant spoke about the problem and the harm done by systems that take individuals out of their communities to "heal". He said,

> "What could be the policies and what are the examples of how we might work together? What are other words for offender or victim that doesn't offend or

[17] Keith, Anita L. Rise UP! Shaping the future of Indigenous Ministry though cross-cultural partnership, 2004, p.ix.

victimize? Who are those who fall out of community for whatever reason? By illness, we segregate them. By offences, we put them away. By age, we stick them in places; sometimes separating couples in old age when they need each other. We won't let them be together. That's terrible! So, we put them outside the community, supposedly to heal them. But it's really to punish them. It's in community that they will be restored."

Christian values

In response to the question 'Are there specific values among the Christian Aboriginal community that positively impact the healing process?' participants noted,

> "In truth, we've been talking generally here about the symptoms of a larger problem that gets created by our system of criminal justice. If we reformed that, what we would have is not so much dealing with the symptoms but we begin to create a community healing process. We would take it back into community and build the kinds of structures that we need to respond to those problems. We would have a healing process and a healing journey that would change our communities. They would make places now where we hold people responsible but continue to live with them. We don't isolate them; we don't put them away and then have to deal with them when they get back out."

> "A Christian-based healing process would have to be distinctly Aboriginal and it should deal more with what we can have in communities as an alternative to people going into prisons. Or a community process that allows them to come out safely earlier and work on community healing. So the goal of healing is to not punish the offender, the person for what they've done but to go back and look at what caused them to go off the good road as an individual then allow them to be part of a process that repairs the harm. Does this apply to what occurs within the institution itself? I think we have to have some continuity. It can't be one way institutionally and then different in the community. You got to have some continuity."

One of the key messages at the Gathering was the importance of the way in which Jesus ministered to all who wanted to listen and learn. For Him it was a matter of faith that the message should be heard by everyone. He also lived as He preached. This, it was believed, were reasons why we was hated and maligned by others. As participants said,

> "All I can say from my experience is that life is a gift and life is a mystery. I really see God in all lives and there are pathways that are a mystery to me as to where God calls people. I see my role as being faithful, as much as I can be, and to help people to be faithful to whom they are and to be walking with them. And for me, my spirituality was very much fashioned by that. I saw Jesus, who was a Jew, He went to his synagogue, to his Church, and he was faithful to who he saw. He was faithful to his Father. But most of all my spirituality was fashioned by the way Jesus was with people and I'm trying to live that way. He did not choose to

be with some and not with others. He was open to everyone. That was probably the biggest thing that people held against him; that he would be open to everyone and be there for them where ever they were. He would listen to their stories. I think that when people are able to speak their story, they start seeing better who they are. So, for me I hope that being who I am acts as profoundly as I can be. I hope I am as honest as I can be, and be faithful to listening to others and let them be who they are. I think that's how healing will happen in our communities. Everyone can feel that they are worthy, that they are loved and lovable, and that they have something to give to the rest of humanity."

"But we don't need to reinvent another 'ism'. We need to walk according to what our tradition teaches us. We have to be whoever we are and live by our principles. By doing that, others will walk away saying it's something to consider, something to weight, something to consider and that maybe there is validity to what you talk about. And yah, they throw back the white-man religion thing, and I say that Jesus was a Jew. He was probably darker than you, as a Semitic. He and his ragtag group of people were available to anybody who came by. We know the parable of the rich young ruler. We know the people who came by. But you know, God looks into the heart, and that's why I say God is looking into your heart and God is your main man. I compare it to a boxing match. He's the cut man, he's the guy cheering you on and he's also there when the punches are being thrown. Every so often he'll catch the punch. Sometimes you feel it, sometimes you don't but, you know, he's there for you and he brings the balm, the thing of healing. But they have to see the relevancy of why to believe. Why should I believe? Why should I choose? When they see the by-products of Peace, Joy, Love, the fruits of the Spirit, then it's attractive. It makes sense. It makes sense to actually commit themselves to a path."

Community

While the need for continuity between healing activities in institutions had community healing processes is important, most participants felt that "community" was the most important part of the equation. As they noted,

"If we had an alternative system, and we'll never have one as long as we have a system we're relying on. But if we could, it would be ideal to develop a system where the community could take its own responsibility back. We've given it away to the current system and it's not working."

"I think a third thing you absolutely need if you're going to heal is community. Community can be a gang and community can be a family. Community can also be a Church congregation, or a Healing lodge. Without community you can't heal.

"I think the place where we start is in the community. Yesterday I gave examples of how it was working in some communities that some Elders took the

responsibility of working with the families who had members that were incarcerated and became the bridge between the two. It's important that the whole community be receptive to people who are coming back into the community. Education is very important and will help the communities develop their openness to people who are different. That's where we have start, not in big ways, in small ways where people come together and learn to love one another and learn about what's hurting one another to see if together we can heal."

"I think the community has to really start taking responsibility for the healing of their people, whoever those people are. It can be just as well for other races. If these people feel they can come back home and some kind of healing has happened, it would be good. So I think whatever model is used, community is something very important to keep in mind. We don't expect people to come out of jail and integrate into a vacuum."

"Continuity in corrections now begins with corrections and ends with community. And everywhere I go, I am arguing, 'Please don't start there. Please start with community.' Let's not start looking at people as though they are dropped in from Mars or from the moon.' They are children. They are Canadians. They are citizens. They are people who have a history, and have been on a journey. And now they have ended up with CSC in adult corrections. That didn't just happen. These are people from the community. They have been on a journey and they have ended up here."

Participants' comments at times mirrored the finding of the Royal Commission on Aboriginal People in its report "Bridging the Cultural Divide" which recognized "among the most remarkable Aboriginal justice initiatives in the last decade are those that have taken place inside Canadian prisons"[18]. The report recognized the value of cultural and spiritual programs for federal inmates but acknowledged the "need for community-based and community-controlled Aboriginal programs that build upon the work done inside prisons"[19]. While the Royal Commission's report placed their finding within the context of traditional Aboriginal culture and spirituality, participants recognized that the same needs were present within a Christian context. As one person stated,

"We need structures that actually help people when they go back into the community that will allow them to heal. You can't heal without an economic base. You can't go out with your little blue suitcase, your one pair of shoes and $50 in your pocket and think you're going to work on that healing process when you get out. You need structures built into that. To me it's a whole kind of grouping of different aspects that are absolutely necessary to healing and spirituality is that basis, you absolutely have to have that because otherwise where is the meaning? "

Dedication

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[18] Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, "Bridging the Cultural Divide". 1996, p. 126
[19] Royal Commission on Aboriginal Peoples, "Bridging the Cultural Divide". 1996, p. 137

Participants recognized that any healing process requires dedicated individuals and volunteers in the community who can act as healers and mentors to those in need. Many of these individuals are still on their own healing journey and require support, both through their faith and with help from others, to achieve a healing environment. It was noted that,

> "I think we have to invite people to have a new world view, if their experience to date hasn't taught them to give. Volunteerism is discovering part of us that wants to give. I come with something of abundance that I have and that I can give to someone else. If I don't experience that abundance and joy in my own life, I won't volunteer it to anybody else, because I will be stingy and greedy and want to hold what I have. But if I have an abundance, I will want to discover it in volunteerism and I'll want to give it."

> "If we are relating to offenders horribly in the system by having this power over them, and degrading and clawing their humanity out of them, how do we expect them to be human when they come out? That doesn't make sense to my brain. Help them to form a vision. Embrace their dreaming. I think that they need to embrace this and who they are and how God made them and God speaks to them. Provide mentors, guides and honour them. Help them with critical thinking and logical choice making. Even start with the small things. Work up so they have a pattern of making successful choices. Maybe some of this is already being done and I just don't know it."

> "The third thing is the healer, the respect and justly given respect to the healer because a lot of healers in the Aboriginal community, as you know, are on their own healing journeys. Some of them need healing too. So, that has to be considered as well. Healers are the critical conduits for the information going back with the people, whether it's Traditional or Christian healing."

> "We need to create some sense of unity to help the healing process, but we don't need to reinvent another ism. We need to walk according to what our tradition teaches us, whoever we are and live with it. There are some programs now helping with this on the other side of the wire With the Nishnabe-Aski Nation, for example, with youth mentoring in Thunder Bay and other communities, they're actually making impacts. You know, it's the people that God calls, or uses, to walk with people who can be mentors, who can be conduits of these tools like Peace, Joy or Love or Truth."

> "At that level, people will buy into the kind of work that we do. We have people volunteering all across the country. Hundreds and hundreds who are deeply committed in their faith, and some who aren't, but are deeply committed towards community safety, and share a common value, purpose, belief and respect. They have a genuine sense of caring for what's going on around them."

"As I was listening around the Circle, I think that some of you have said that you now have found yourselves to some extent and you want to give more to the community. I think that in our lives we can be facilitators of that. We hardly have to ask the question whether Christianity or Aboriginal tradition is necessary for the healing of people. Because if you're faithful to who God is, God made us and he said it's very good. He made us different so our expressions have to be different and that's very good. I think if we let people be who they are, very good, I think our communities will heal. Meegwetch."

"The barriers are just that, fear. There's a lot of fear. Or his way is right, or my way is right. I try not to do that. I try to be a good role model for my clients because the bottom line is I want them to heal. I want to help them any way I can. If we can't sit down and talk as adults, than I think we need to both be in treatment because we need to learn how to listen and really respect each other. I guess that's all I wanted to say. Thank You."

During the Gathering, participants gave a number of concrete examples to demonstrate how they have become guides or mentors for offenders returning to their communities. Examples included,

"I'm called in on some of the section 84 meetings because there are Native prisoners who are looking for their release. They want to connect with somebody in the community who can help them learn how to follow a path with Jesus. Once I'm connected, and there's lots of ways get connected. Sometimes it's through the newspaper or somebody writes to the office. But I don't get paid for that. I'm way off my job description. Once a person accepts a hand in friendship, and I'll put it that way, we can connect. We can connect right inside the institution long before they're released. I can offer to open the Bible with them and I can offer just to be a friend. Once they're released, I can offer transportation for instance. Well you get the picture. I can introduce them to other people that I know in the community that can likewise become their resources. They are real live people in the community that care. And that may include inviting them to attend my little local Church. We get together in a fellowship where they may connect with other people. Certainly it's a network of real live people. I question what has been done in the past by CSC to discover that network of Christians living in the communities of Canada. The ones that come along side ex-offenders to help. You don't even have to throw money at them. I think has got to be part of the process we're talking about here."

"But I think right now, like a friend, I'm working with Aboriginal ex-gang members. There are Cree, Ojibway and Sioux that are all involved in this. We're just like advocates in that program. We're like advocates. We share resources. If they're Ojibway we show them Ojibway Elders, or Cree Elders, or Sioux Elders. We give whatever kind of resource we can give to these guys, even interpreting when they go to court, and stuff like that. We've got communications with Aboriginal court workers, parole officers and probation officers. All in this one

house we have all that, I figure if we can build a bigger house, a bigger facility, we can have maybe different denominations than this one. We have over 200 clients. We're waiting for a permit for a residence. It's a safe house that we've got. It's the only safe house we have for ex-gang members. It's the first of its kind. Our funding comes from the homelessness. We have no funding from Corrections. We have no funding from Restorative Justice. We have no funding whatsoever from any other agency. Actually we never approached anybody. We didn't know how it was going to turn out We all pull as a team with all different knowledges."

While participants acknowledged the need for volunteers and mentors in communities to support offender healing and reintegration, one individual stressed the need to have volunteers work with offenders while they are still incarcerated. He pointed out that it is often difficult to get volunteers through CSC's screening process, but the result is well worth the difficulty. He stated,

> "Some of the screening that was done in Stoney Mountain discouraged the volunteers from coming in. Some just came, however, and it didn't matter even though the screening was hard. I encourage volunteers that are going to go into the prisons to just go because there is a great need for them in the institutions today. There is a great need to know that there's people out there that really care and accept people that are in the walls. A lot of guys inside don't feel that. They don't feel they're accepted in the community. They don't feel that they're good enough to go to some form of organization or some sort of facility on the outside or even to church. They don't feel that they can be accepted there. Without that link between the inside and the outside, it's not going to work. It'll never work. CSC has to help to bring in volunteers. It can't be only the inmates. The inmates have to play a part in it too. I know it's hard for CSC to attract people on the inside just because of the trust factor.
>
> I try to get some volunteers to go inside because there is a great need for that. The people who run these organizations out here and even the churches, the church leaders today, are our role models, like it or not. Our leaders today, out here, have to get involved in some way because it does inspire the guys inside. The mayor in there and one of the guys kind of disrespected him and stuff like that. But at the end of the day they were all in the gymnasium to meet him and shake his hand. It's people like that, that inspire people. And they go in and say, 'Guess who I met.' It's just little things like that, that keep on being an inspiration. They keep on mentioning all the time. There are have people with the qualifications and even though you may not think it inspires anybody, it does."

Summation

While time did not allow for the dialogue to continue further, a number of participants summed up the discussion as follows.

"I think there are a few elements that would be necessary for an Aboriginal Christian combined effort in healing. One element is that it would have the Christian spiritual meaning at its core. That would really be critical. It should be coming from the initiative of the inmates or residents themselves. I think that it would incorporate safety and identity issues. Other important elements are the community personal responsibility, forgiveness and reconciliation. It should also look at historic trauma and what trauma has meant in our communities in terms of, individual trauma have lived, as well as the cycle of trauma that's gone on in communities as a whole."

"This is how I would see the question: 'Traditional expressions of worship and relationship to God are seen as indispensable in successful healing processes. Is personal expression of relationship and worship to God, regardless of its form, the key to successful healing processes?' and I would say, 'Yes.'"

"I don't have a lot to say. What I want to say in reply to what would a Christian-based healing process look like is that it would have to be that you walk your talk and by that I mean there's a lot of people, Christians, that don't walk their talk. You know, you can meet them in the hallway and they don't even have a good word for you, but they're supposed to be Christ like. That's one of the main things for me would be to walk your talk whatever it is."

"And so I want to say, what does the Christian healing process look like? It's faces. It's just faces, some of whom are followers of Jesus, in a context of caring and hoping to help people who need help."

CHAPTER SIX: IDEAS FOR AN ABORIGINAL CHRISTIAN HEALING APPROACH

Institutional approaches

Participants turned their attention to ways in which Aboriginal Christians could be supported in their healing journeys. They believed that offenders needed support and guidance throughout their sentences and Christian-based healing approaches needed to be offered in institutions, in post-release facilities and in the community.

While they recognized that the Correctional Service of Canada has placed a great emphasis on developing and delivering Aboriginal traditional spiritual programs, the participants acknowledged that institutions have provided opportunities for Aboriginal Christian inmates to worship in their faith. Speakers at the Gathering, however, recognized that there was not the range of programs available to Aboriginal Christian inmates as there were for those who followed traditional approaches. A concern was raised that this imbalance of programming may have a negative impact on Aboriginal inmates coming before the National Parole Board since Board members may view inmates' non-attendance in Aboriginal programming as a sign that they had not completed their corrections plan. That being said, while doors have been opened to enable Aboriginal inmates to learn about, and practice, traditional Spirituality and while Elders are accorded a more prominent place in penitentiaries, it has not been at the cost of ensuring the rights of Aboriginal Christians to follow their own teachings. As participants noted,

> "I see the Native spirituality encouraging the Native inmates to take part in that, but they are not being forced to participate in that, they have a choice, either to follow the Christian spirituality or the Native spirituality. That is my experience, so far, in the federal system and I find that it's working well for some."

> "One of the examples that I have seen is a small group called Bridging the Gap Ministry where they have started with the initiative of the inmates at Rockwood Forward Step program. It's simply a Circle and they come together and help each other to rebuild their lives. It's not specifically Christian. Many of the people who are from the community are of Christian background. It's not pushed on any one. So there are some fellows who are of Christian backgrounds, some are of traditional backgrounds. They still have a common ground and it helps them live their lives more fully. And then outside they can communicate with whichever other group they feel more comfortable with or that is compatible with what they have learned."

The group also recognized that Christian inmates, whether Aboriginal or not, are not a homogeneous group and that several denominations can be represented among the inmate population. They acknowledged the Correctional Service of Canada's interfaith

chaplaincy approach and the work that has been done by institutional chaplains to meet the needs of different Christian inmates. As participants said,

> "In some places they have interfaith chaplaincy and you have one chaplain that sort of looks after the work of everybody. In the CSC we've stayed with that distinction, certainly between Protestant and Roman Catholic, and it's working for us. It speaks to the need of a variety of people around to look after the need of offenders within the prison context. We sorted that out because we've agreed to have a set of ethics in the way that we would work with each other and within the context of each ministry. Having said that though, the reality is that when you begin to work with individuals who are new or are making renewed commitments in their faith journeys, that process usually involves individuals holding on to fairly rigid, hard and fast positions. Somehow when we develop policy and process, we need to make provision for those who are starting a journey and needing the really firm ground, really firm boundaries that later, with maturity, they will begin to move beyond."

> "In chaplaincy, we deal with this continually in our world and not just within the prison context but in all of chaplaincy. We like to think that we've evolved or come to place where we've set up fairly reasonable system within the Correctional Service of Canada's Chaplaincy. But I'd like to remind my friends there that we still have as a definition Roman Catholic chaplains and Protestant chaplains. And why is it we need that definition within our system? Well there are some very deep reasons for that. In some places they have Interfaith chaplaincy and you have one chaplain that sort of looks after the work of everybody. But in the CSC we've stayed with that distinction between Protestant and Roman Catholic. It's working for us and it's working for us really well. It speaks to the need of a variety of people around to look after the need of offenders within the prison context. And the way we've sorted that out is we've agreed to have a set of ethics in the way that we would work with each other and within the context of our ministry. This is the way we practice our work in the prison context. People might practice something differently outside the prison context but when they're within, when you work within the CSC umbrella, there's certain set of ethics that will govern the practice of ministry within that setting and it's helped us. People buy into it. If you don't buy into it you don't get the job or you don't get the contract to do the work. People agree to that up front before they come and work with us."

> "I believe and agree that there would have to be a covenant. There would have to be a policy and there would have to be something that is written by way of an agreement of vision. You need an agreement of mission and something that is agreed upon, or otherwise it could never work. Depending on what it is that the mission or the vision states, is the mission or vision stating what we're trying to do here is to bring, probably not holistic healing, but maybe just physical healing or is it just to bring psychological healing or is it to bring social healing between or is it to bring spiritual healing. Depending on what that vision, or mission, is

would again dictate whether or not it's workable or whether or not it can work together. But it certainly comes into play with what Scripture says with respect to agreeing together. 'And how can two walk together unless they agree together.'"

One individual spoke about the Legacy of Hope Coalition that brings together Church leadership and national Aboriginal organizations to address the issue of abuse in residential schools. He felt this type of model could be used as an example for working together.

> "Many people are finding their healing in prison. It's that environment that many people find their healing. So it's how will we do it. And there are models around of how you do it. You have your Multi-faith Councils. A Multi-faith Council maybe is one way. Maybe the chaplaincy within CSC is another way. Maybe it is something like we have now, which is called the Legacy of Hope Coalition. It is working on the issue of Residential Schools. If that isn't a contentious issue I don't know one. The Legacy of Hope Coalition represents the five Churches, the five major Churches. It also represents the five national Aboriginal Organizations and the Aboriginal Healing Foundation and Residential Schools survivors. And that's a contentious issue. That's a really hard issue to talk about. Yet they're meeting on a regular basis and finding solutions to that issue. They can all work together and help in regard to that healing. So if they, if the Churches, the National Aboriginal Organizations and the Residential Schools survivors can get together and talk about that issue, for sure this issue can be one in which we can find a way to do it."

Christian Healing Lodges

The Gathering participants were all aware that the Correctional Service of Canada has established a number of Aboriginal Healing Lodges, or Centres, in many regions across Canada. They also recognized that these Healing Lodges are based upon traditional spiritual teachings and practic s. Because Healing Lodges and Centres are the only Aboriginal-specific facilities within the federal correctional system, participants felt that there needed to be similar facilities available to Aboriginal Christians who want to continue their healing journeys. As participants said,

> "We could recommend, as part of this dialogue, that it would be a good thing to implement Aboriginal Christian Healing Centres. Healing Lodges that are now spread across the country do not have a Christian element to them. The healing lodges, when they work with any group, absolutely have to have a spiritual base. For instance, the halfway house I'm involved with, has a lot of Inuit, a lot of Northern Cree who are very spiritually-based Christians. So you just can't work with tradition kinds of things. You'd be sort of splitting that off, if you talked about a Healing Lodge that would be just for Christians. They need it I would love to do that."

> "I'd love, one day, to be part of an Aboriginal Christian Healing Centre. I think that after 15 years in Corrections, it would be the most refreshing thing to ever experience. To get out from behind the wire and to be part of something that is innovative and creative and has the cutting edge to see people embrace their humanity, embrace their spirituality and to see them saying, 'You know what? I can actually now see the sunlight, see the sunrise and smell the air and see the beauty.' Thank you."

> "The thinking is that there are some people who are dead set against culture. So, what you're talking about is a traditional healing lodge that encompasses Christianity. Usually traditional people are inclusive but Aboriginal people who have turned away from their culture and have embraced Christianity seem to be really entrenched. But they still need that healing. Correct me if I am wrong, but I think the approach of the Aboriginal Christian Healing Centre would come at healing from a Christian approach as opposed to a more traditional one."

> "Another thing we found that is absolutely critical is safety. People can't heal without feeling safe. In certain environments you don't feel safe and unless you can feel that safety you can't really heal. That may be the reason for having; you know what you were suggesting, a Healing lodge that is a Christian Healing Lodge were you feel really safe."

A number of the participants believed that Aboriginal Christian Healing Lodges were essential to continue the Christian teachings that inmates received in federal institutions. They also needed a place where they could maintain their healing supports after leaving a penitentiary. As some noted,

> "I went to a Healing Lodge, I went to an Aboriginal one and they didn't share any of the teachings of the Bible. When I came out onto the street, I did not feel comfortable being around some Churches, but I was invited to them. I didn't feel comfortable being around the atmosphere as long as people have not lived what I lived and seen what I'd seen."

> "When I went to Crane River and while I was there they wanted us to follow this policy that they had in place. You had to do the sweats; you have to have one-on-one conversations with your Elder. Everything revolved in the traditional aspect. And during that time I was thinking that I had just learned about the Lord. I really wanted to learn a lot more about Him. So I started doing my own little studying. I was thinking instead of an Aboriginal Healing Lodge, it would have been nice to have an Aboriginal Christian Healing Lodge.

One participant summed up the nature of an Aboriginal Christian healing lodge by saying,

> "This challenges me to look at a Healing Lodge as something that is Christ centred, something that has Biblical principles. It is something that involves

> Christian counsellors and something that involves Christian psychologists. It would be able to formulate a group that I think will work with other people and see how they perceive it. They're experts in their fields and they know what they're doing. They would counsel many people of the same faith and see where we go with that. Then we'll give a choice to those people."

Christians are widely known and respected for their support to individuals in need. Participants saw this as a key element in supporting the continuation of an inmate's healing journey. Through support from Aboriginal Christians in the community, an inmate would have a safe and comfortable transition from an institution to the community. As one participant noted,

> "Progress like this requires a network of real live people. So what has been done in the past through CSC to discover that network of Christians living in the communities of Canada that come along side ex-offenders to help and you don't even have to throw money at them? I think this is something that also needs to be looked at."

In terms of developing an Aboriginal Christian healing centre or approach in communities, however, participants recognized that the majority of funding available to Aboriginal healing and treatment programs is directed to those programs providing traditional cultural and spiritual programs. Some saw this as a real barrier to creating an Aboriginal Christian response to people in need while others felt that money could actually inhibit change. Participant commented that,

> "Are there examples of Aboriginal Christian healing and processes in Canada? Well, I can't think of any. I know there's some out there. I'm thinking more in particularly the US. I was in Minneapolis several years ago, and I met a fellow, a Christian man, and they built an Aboriginal healing lodge. And this gentleman is Christian and is an interesting fellow. He knows how to raise funds. I don't know what it's like in the US to access public money, but I think here in Canada, it's a little more difficult for a Christian entity. In Calgary, we have Native Addictions Services. It's a treatment Centre and it's very traditional. They just built a new facility. It's not Christian so they received money from ADAC. They probably received other monies as well. So I think in terms of Aboriginal Christian Healing Centres, they are few and far between because, of course, it takes money to do certain things. When you are looking at it from a Christian context, that is one thing, but when you look at it in an Aboriginal Christian that is another. As an Aboriginal Pastor, I am serving and economically impoverished community. Churches are volunteer organizations, so it is pretty difficult for us in a local church to establish an Aboriginal Healing Centre without resources. If it is an Aboriginal healing lodge or centre, that is, if the whole philosophy is Traditional Aboriginal Spirituality, there are funds for that, but when it comes for anything that is Christian, it is very difficult to access public funds. That is the financial situation and that is why you don't see as many Aboriginal Christian healing centres or lodges."

> "Of course, the government does not want to sponsor religious bodies with public monies. Of course, there is the separation of religion and state argument, but I think it is needed. There are other organizations that are not primordially Aboriginal that re providing services to offenders. The Mennonite Central Committee is an example. It is a non-Aboriginal organization providing services to Aboriginal offenders."

> "I think Christianity has done a lot of healing, very powerful, successful healing. It's just that the Government of Canada and the State are not suppose to work with the Churches."

> "Secondary to both identity and challenge for me is the issue of funding; where the money is, and power, and who makes the decisions. Often we mistake power for truth and funding for ability. But real change doesn't happen necessarily because we have the funds and the power. Real change happens where it happens, if we have eyes to see it. Sometimes people with the money and the power keep change from happening."

In spite of all the differences that exist between Aboriginal and Christian traditions and beliefs, and among different Christian denominations, the participants saw the value of setting aside differences and working collectively towards a common goal. If everyone believes that the healing of individuals in need is the primary responsibility of everyone, then the differences that exist between helpers should not get in the way of meeting their ultimate and common goal. One participant shared his views about possible ways to improve co-operation by stating,

> "So it seems that the question is how will we do it. There are models around about how to do it. A Multi-faith Council is maybe one way. The chaplaincy within CSC is another way. Maybe something could be created like we have now, which is called the Legacy of Hope Coalition. This group is working on the issue of Residential Schools and if that isn't a contentious issue what else is? The Legacy of Hope Coalition represents the five Churches; the five major Churches. It also represents the five Aboriginal Native Organizations, the national ones. The Aboriginal Healing Foundation and the Residential Schools survivors are also part of the group. Now there's an example of a contentious issue that's a really hard issue to talk about. Yet they're meeting on a regular basis and finding solutions. So if they, if the Churches and the National Aboriginal Organizations and the Residential Schools survivors can get together and talk about that issue, for sure we can find a way of doing the same with this issue.

CHAPTER SEVEN: SOME FINAL THOUGHTS

As stated at the beginning of this report, its purpose is to tell the story of the two-day Gathering of Aboriginal Christian leaders and illustrate the nature of the conversation held, unfortunately, most of the questions posed to the Gathering participants were not, or could not be, addressed. Those questions included:

1) Are there examples of Aboriginal Christian healing and restorative processes in Canada? If so, how do they work? If not, why not?

2) What values of the Christian faith speak to the concept of community and what is the relationship between community and individual responsibility for addressing the needs of victims and offenders?

3) Recognizing that there is diversity among different faiths, what would a Christian based healing process look like?

4) How could First Nation's Christian Church leaders become more involved in meeting the needs of offenders/victims and making communities safer?

5) Where in the structure of the healing process should the Church place itself?

6) How can the Church support the development of healers in the community?

7) Are there specific values among the Christian Aboriginal community that positively impact the healing process?

8) Are there ways in which Christian and traditional followers can work together towards restoring harmony within the individual, family and community in the same community? What do you see as the possible barriers?

9) How should policy be shaped to include all faith practices and yet ensure that Aboriginal culture be honored or respected?

The conversation was both far reaching and came from the hearts of the participants. And, regardless of which denomination the participants followed, the conversations were always directed towards seeking what would be good for those in need of healing.

A second purpose of this report is to enable those who were not part of the Gathering to begin to think about Aboriginal Christian approaches to healing and to think about the underlying question that led to the Gathering: "If spirituality is at the base of the healing movement, does it matter what form of spirituality an individual and healing process takes so long as the objective is to heal the individual?" This question is one that could be raised within correctional institutions, and services and organizations that support

individual, family and community well-being. It is also a question that could be addressed by government policy makers.

The participants recognized that two days were insufficient to address many of the questions that were raised by the Aboriginal Corrections Policy Unit. They appreciated having an opportunity to meet together as Aboriginal Christians and, for the first time, collectively be able to discuss their roles within the growing Aboriginal healing movement. They all saw a place for themselves as individual Christians, and the Christian Church as physical and spiritual centres, in the creation of more options for individuals in need.

> "I know that I just want to end off by stealing a quote Martin Luther King. 'I have a dream that someday our people will be healed and will have the freedom to be truly what God has created them for.' Thank you."

In closing, participants raised issues as a way of opening peoples minds to more questions that needed answering, either as part of a second Gathering or in time of quite reflection by those who were soon to return home. They said,

> "What we're looking for is a vision, some sense of what it will take, whether it's Aboriginal or native spirituality or Christianity or a mixture, a combination or other faiths. I think that fragmentation is really worrisome. It's worrisome in terms of asking CSC to fund a whole lot of different programs, it's worrisome in terms of what it does to the very people who are in the system and it's worrisome within the communities and the kind of conflict it's created. But I just raised that as a concern of mine."

> "What was going on is certainly a legitimate question. On the one hand there are a lot of negative stuff and still is a lot of negative stuff today for which Indians are responsible and no one else. A lot of it tends on the part of the well intentioned and even on the part of some enlightened people to change and to help our people. That said, you can't write off the whole Indian traditional experience because of the abuses. If that is something that we must do, then we must also write off a large percentage of ministers, preachers, priests, nuns and rabbis for the same reason. All that is testimony to the human condition confirming that you find imperfection everywhere. The sooner in life you can make your peace and accept that humans are weak then you recognize that there are means and ways of addressing the weaknesses and helping people strive for better."

> "I think our policies have to address what is happening and that needs are changing all the time. It's the goals that should guide us. Meetings like this are part of the process that gives us an opportunity to discuss what has happened to us. We have to have a willingness to move forward. We want to have programs in our communities, schools and in our churches that invite people at all levels, and from all the diversity in or communities, to learn from each other. Faith in life needs to be practiced in society. It is how to be open, and responsive and

> listening to each other. We have to have educational programs designed for schools, public schools, kindergarten schools, high schools, where all youth can experience diversity and community and learn to live with care and gentleness. We have to train the staff in all our institutions, prisons, penitentiaries, hospitals, nursing care places to be sensitive to people."

Another participant summed up his views about the way forward by saying,

> "So, I come here seeking the same thing we all seek, knowledge and understanding and help for our own journeys. And if these journeys are going to be with our people as we leave this building we must be prepared to take the blows with it. Not just the blows, but the misunderstandings that will come because this is Aboriginal Christianity. Well, you know what, your problems - take them up with the Boss because we're all in sales, he's the only one in management and promotions. Thank you."

Aboriginal people are known for their story-telling and their humour. Quite often these jokes and stories are told in a way that makes the listener think about the meaning of life and his or her place in Creation. One such story was shared at the end of the Gathering.

> "It was a beautiful day - something like it is outside. If you look outside, you see the nice trees and it was just lovely. This atheist was walking through the trees, the wilderness and it was just lovely. He could feel the wind, hear the wind blowing and the tops of the trees were moving. He was just enjoying his walk in nature, when all of a sudden a big bear comes out of the woods and charges at him. He got scared, turned and started to run. As he was running he fell down and when he fell down, he looked up and the bear was just ready to pounce on him.
>
> "He cried, 'My God, help!' and so everything froze. The trees stopped, the wind was quiet; everything became still, even the bear that was leaning over him, kind of froze. All of a sudden, a voice came down from God and said, 'I thought you didn't believe in me.' The atheist said, 'No, I don't believe in you.' God said, 'Then why did you call out to me for help? The atheist said, 'I don't believe in you. I never believed in you and I don't know if I will believe in you, now. But you know what would be helpful, God? If you could change this bear into a Christian bear and then perhaps it might not be so bad.' God said, 'I'll turn this bear into a Christian bear.' So this bear turns into a Christian bear. All of a sudden, this big bear brings his paws down like this and says, 'God, for this food I'm about to receive, I give you thanks!' That's the story."

Another comment by a participant shows that humour in a different light.

> "Prison and jail officials in southern Manitoba had to confiscate Bibles recently, particularly in Headingly Jail. Smoking is not permitted and the fine paper in some of those Bibles is perfect for rolling cigarettes. Here's my favourite

comment on that from a prisoner in Headingly Jail: 'I smoked my way through Matthew. I smoked my way through Mark. I smoked my way through Luke. But when I got to John, I found that God loves me and I gave my heart to Jesus Christ.'"

Participant List

Kerry McLaughlin – Chaplain, Thunder Bay Correctional Centre

Donna Antoine – Counsellor, Native Horizons Treatment Centre

Dr. Joe Couture – Psychologist, Pe Sakastew Healing Lodge

Ted Renaud – Lutheran Community Care Centre

The Right Reverend Gordon Beardy

Dean Shingoose – Pastor, Calgary Native Pentecostal Church

Izzy Vermette – Manager, PaaPii Wak

David Christmas – The Maples Community Church

Mr. Lance Wood

Thelma Pelletier – Institutional Chaplain, Pacific Institution - RTC

Reverend Cliff Holloway

Anita Keith – Administrator, North American Institute for Indigenous Theological Studies

Ron Hunt

Margot Lavoie

Joseph Romain

Matthew Coon Come

Gail Valaskakis – Aboriginal Healing Foundation

Ed Buller – Public Safety & Emergency Preparedness Canada

Corina Hayward – Public Safety & Emergency Preparedness Canada

David Molzahn – Chaplaincy, Correctional Service Canada